

Cruise to yesterday in Vietnam's magical bay

Replica boat casts a spell, evoking the era when elegance ruled the seas

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HALONG BAY, Vietnam - After the Filipino torch singer finished her set, the tom-tom 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: Perhaps I'd stepped back in time as well.



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 paddle wheeler is as emblematic of French-colonial indolence as anything ever was in Vietnam.

Way out on Halong Bay now, among the silhouettes of myriad limestone karsts, my disorientation was deepening. I began to feel the way you can after a nap when you surface from sleep into an unmoored hour, giddy with the knowledge that you are completely lost with respect to time.

I wasn't the only one under the Emeraude's spell.

As the tom-tom drums punctuated the song's next passage, and the horns blared toward a crescendo, an American passenger at the neighboring table leaned toward his dinner companions and waggishly asked, "Well, what do you think the Nazis are going to do next?"

Beautiful Halong Bay

In Halong Bay, it's hard not to be struck dumb. Last year, while touring this corner of Vietnam's Gulf of Tonkin aboard a wooden junk, I'd 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 countless hundreds of limestone islands, buoyed up on darkening jade-green waters -- the work of a wand, I thought, not geology.

Though I'd seen this panorama once before, in 1993, it still seemed almost unbelievable to me -- these waters, these prehistoric expressions of earth, the flotilla of wooden junks moored offshore with their ribbed lugsails furled.

Myths about the bay's formation vary. There's the one about the dragon that plunged into the sea ("ha long" means "dragon descending") with its tail thrashing this way and that, thereby dredging the bay and sculpting the islands. Another credits a dragon who spewed

a mouthful of pearls at an invasion fleet. Geologists tell a different story, of course -- about sedimentary limestone and 300 million years of erosion and chiseling tides. But standing on Titov that day, with a quasi-religious sense of awe blossoming in my chest, I couldn't buy into all that bunk the geologists were selling.

It must have been a dragon.

Then I looked to the northwest and saw the *Emeraude*, with its wheel housing dipped off the stern, the two lower decks strung with cabins, seersucker-clad passengers sipping cocktails under an awning on the sun deck. The wooden junks were clustered together, but the *Emeraude* stood off, aloof and disdainful, like imperial France herself.

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 presse in my hand.

An old postcard

"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 Indochina, 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 first came to Vietnam as a backpacker in 1990, shortly after the country had cracked open its doors to travelers. As a newly minted undergrad, he was on his Grand Tour. After he returned home to France, his brother landed him a job at EuroDisney. Merlin lasted all of two weeks in the company of Mickey Mouse. After quitting, he boomeranged back to Vietnam, where he started flexing some new-found entrepreneurial muscle.

In 1993, he launched *Exotissimo*, now Vietnam's premier inbound tour operator. Then he founded an architectural firm, a bamboo flooring factory, a lacquerware workshop, a gourmet-food importer and a 122-room boutique hotel (the refurbished former residence of the colonial governor of central Vietnam) called *La Résidence*. After failing to find the boat he'd seen on that postcard, he commissioned the construction of a replica for \$2.4 million.

While shipbuilders in Haiphong were riveting the hull, Merlin was puzzling together the *Emeraude's* history. Back in France at the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence, he discovered the boat had belonged to a colonial French concern owned by a Paul Roque, so Merlin dispatched 1,220 letters -- one to every Roque he found in French telephone directories. The calls started coming in -- 10, 20, 30 from these different Roques.

"Any Roque who had a connection to Asia, they were calling," he said. "But then one man calls. He says, 'We are the family you are looking for.' "

The man's great-grandfather was one of three enterprising brothers who embarked for the Far East from Bordeaux in 1858, the same year France established a colonial realm in Vietnam that would last nearly 100 years. The Roques were into "everything," according to a family history -- sugar, opium, timber, public works, steamships. They amassed such a fortune that Chinese pirates kidnapped and tortured two of them in 1890. They survived, poorer for the ransom paid, but no less committed to the colonies of French Indochina.

In 1905, Paul Roque, one brother's son, ordered the construction of nearly identical paddle wheelers -- the Rubis, Perle, Saphir and Emeraude.

They equipped the boats with electric lights, ventilation and refrigeration. They installed darkrooms for photographers, and they offered cruises on Halong Bay. For decades, the Emeraude hauled cargo and delighted passengers, until it struck a rock in 1937 and sank, a bit more than four miles out of Cam Pha.

Aboard the Emeraude

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 due south at nine knots toward the heart of Halong Bay. Compared with accommodation on a 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; there was polished hardwood underfoot.

The Emeraude evokes a colonial ambience but eschews absolute fidelity for modern conveniences. As in each of the boat's 39 cabins, I had my own bathroom, air-conditioning and mobile-phone reception.

The 55-meter-long vessel is powered by diesel, not steam, and driven by a propeller.

On a tour of the wheelhouse, I followed the index finger of Capt. Jacques LeFur as he pointed out various islands and their resemblances to a turtle, a toad, a swan, a human head and so on. This is the great parlor game in Halong Bay.

Nearly 2,000 islands rise from the 1,553-square-kilometer bay, about a third of which -- including the route of our looping cruise -- is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Over tens of millions of years, the tides have eroded away the bases of these karsts, so that many seem to bob on the water's surface.

Halong's craggy outcrops are inhospitable and largely uninhabited but for the odd troop of gibbons and the soaring birds of prey that nest in cliff-top crevices. Individually, they're brooding and austere, but taken altogether that's where the majesty is. It's in that inimitable panorama.

Kurt Walter, the Emeraude's general manager, has logged more than 100 voyages on the ship since its maiden voyage in 2003. He told me about the bay's nuances: the way fog snarls about the islands' vegetation; the sublime hues at twilight; how lightning can cast an eerie illumination over the bay.

'The cave of marvels'

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 -- "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 2.5 acres. Stalactites hang from the ceiling like the roots of molars.

The usual characters are paralyzed in stone here -- turtles, dragons, a Happy Buddha, the Goddess of Mercy -- shapes commonly attributed to rock formations in Vietnam. There's also one genuine surprise, a pillar of limestone that resembles, according to my guide, the "special part" of a randy dragon, cast in a lurid red hue by artificial lighting.

The path through the third, most immense chamber loops past graffiti scrawled by tourists over the years, including one inscription left by a Frenchman in 1907.

After winding through Sung Sot for a half mile, we emerged into the light of Halong Bay and rode the tender back to the Emeraude in contemplative quiet.

After one dinner, I stood at the ship's rail, scanning the lights of the junks in the distance and the brooding silhouettes of the karsts 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 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 him. He'd seen their pictures, too. Would they be resurrected one day too? Merlin remained silent, and in that I guessed his answer. But as my view swept across the bay again, it wasn't all that difficult to picture the rest of the Roques' fleet of paddle wheelers -- the Saphir, the Rubis, and the Perle -- sailing up out of the past, their lights twinkling on the water as the band played on.

James Sullivan, a writer based in Vietnam, is author of "National Geographic Traveler: Vietnam," to be published this week.

Aboard the Emeraude

A two-day, one-night cruise aboard the ship is currently priced at \$169 double occupancy and up. Details: www.halongtravel.com/emercruise.html.

It is represented in Canada by Global Travel: 416-516-1113.