

Emeraude: Luxury travel in a bay where dragons spit pearls in Vietnam

By [Tim McDonald](#), National Golf Editor, [Golf Publisher Syndications](#) | Wednesday June 13, 2007



Courtesy [emeraude-cruises.com](#)
The 56-meter-long Emeraude is the most luxurious way to experience Vietnam's Halong Bay.

HALONG BAY, Vietnam — One of the great luxuries in life is sleeping outside, on the deck of a good-sized vessel. That's what I'm doing now.

Well, technically, I'm waking up, since I couldn't be taking notes while I'm unconscious, unless I was James Joyce or Sigmund Freud.

What makes this all the more interesting is that I have no idea what I will see, once first light hits. I've done no research on the ship or Halong Bay, through sloth and personal preference.

We arrived aboard the Emeraude last night in utter darkness, fresh — or should I say, not so fresh — from 18 holes at [Chi Linh Star Golf Club](#). The 45-minute ride on two small tenders over the choppy waters of Halong Bay, in the Gulf of Tonkin not far from the Chinese border, ended with a clamber aboard this 56-meter-long replica steamer, anchored in a small,

bright circle of light.

Outside the circle, total black. A sea of nothingness.

I'm getting my answer now: the early hint of light slowly reveals monstrous, monolithic shapes, some of them startling close. It's a little like when they first spot the island King Kong lives on. A blue mist, perfect for the occasion, moves across the bay like a ghost trailing a long gown.

We're in a horseshoe-shaped bay within a bay, the looming shapes rising around us on three sides, like malevolent giants. I get up from the narrow, wood chaise and walk the decks. More of these looming shapes emerge. They surround us, near and far. We're in the mountains, only we're at sea. How can this be?



[Tim McDonald/GolfPublisher.com](#)
Vietnamese fishermen go after squid in the early morning hours, on Halong bay.

Later, the Emeraude raises anchor and starts to cruise. Coffee clears my head, but not my perspective. Everywhere you look, these limestone islands soar from the watery depths, the mist still clinging stubbornly.

We're moving slowly through an unearthly landscape of rock and water. It's the kind of place that begs for myth, and so I come up with one that seems to fit: This is a vast graveyard of the ancient gods.

The Saint Mother, the Jade Emperor and the Highest Warrior of the Mysterious Northern Heaven must all be buried here.

It turns out, I wasn't that far off. The Vietnamese myth of Halong ("Bay of the Descending Dragon") holds that the country was once invaded by enemy ships and the Jade Emperor sent a Mother Dragon and her children to earth. They spit pearls into the bay, which transmogrified into thousands of stone islands.

The invading vessels crashed into these islands and splintered apart. Mother Dragon and her children enjoyed the show so much, they decided to stay.

Presumably, that means they're still here. Maybe they're protecting us from the mines that are still in some of the channels between the islands, a reminder of the U.S. Navy's time here.

Halong Bay aboard the Emeraude

Halong Bay is one of the most popular [Vietnam tourism](#) attractions, designated as a World Heritage Site in 1994. The Emeraude is one way to see it, certainly the most luxurious, but there are hundreds of other, authentic junks to take tourists out. These boats are easy to spot and their authenticity verified — they're the ones with giant "tourist" signs.

There are nearly 2,000 limestone, monolithic islands in the bay, every one a different shape and a different size. Half of them are named, many after animals and other things their shapes suggest: elephant and fighting cock, for example.

Some of them are hollow, with huge caves where you can see 19th century French graffiti. Two of the bigger islands have permanent residents and tourist facilities, Tuan Chau and Cat Ba. Others have animals like antelopes, monkeys and iguanas living on them.

The Emeraude has several cruises of different lengths, and offers visits to some of the islands, like Sung Sot Cave (the Surprise Grotto), the most spectacular limestone cave in the bay. The island can be climbed and inside is a two-chambered cave.

Titov Mountain is about 10 miles from the wharf with a steep cliff on one side and a gentle slope on the other, ending in a sandy beach. There is also a visit to Cua Van Fishing village, a floating village where the schoolchildren paddle to school. Some of the more successful fishermen have televisions.



Folk legend has it Vietnamese were saved by dragons spitting pearls at invading ships in Halong Bay.



Some of the limestone islands are hollow, creating vast caves.

There are also Sea Lion Inlet and the Virgin Cave (Hang Trinh Nu), where folk legend has it a virgin who refused to marry a powerful mandarin committed suicide when her body turned to stone.

The Emeraude has an interesting history in itself. It's a replica of one of four ships built in 1906 by a French family named Roque, for shipping and tourist cruises. The ship struck a rock and sank in 1937.

Not long ago, a man named Eric Merlin was browsing in a Paris bookstore and came across a postcard of the Emeraude. Fascinated by the idea of tourist cruises on Halong Bay at the turn of the last century, he called every Roque in the phone book, more than 1,200 of them, before finding the real descendants.

Merlin is the managing director of the Apple Tree Group, which financed construction of the Emeraude in the Haiphon shipyard in 2002. Having no blueprint, the ship was built largely from the picture on the postcard.

In truth, the Emeraude isn't really close to [Vietnamese golf](#); you have to go out of your way to experience it. But, it is well worth the effort.

The ship has 38 rooms, decorated in French Colonial style, and a "Paul Roque" suite. All of the rooms have air-conditioning and private shower.

It's a 700-ton vessel that cruises at 10 knots. The Emeraude has a high-speed tender, and offers cooking classes, live entertainment, beach excursions, kayak rental and massage. There is a restaurant and two bars, one in the restaurant and one open-air bar on the sundeck.

Any opinions expressed above are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the management. The information in this story was accurate at the time of publication. All contact information, directions and prices should be confirmed directly with the golf course or resort before making reservations and/or travel plans.

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The verdict on the Emeraude

If you go

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