

VIETNAM

ON THE RISE

written by
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HALONG BAY
Composed of more than one thousand limestone karsts and islands, Halong Bay is one of the most romantic and beautiful destinations in Vietnam.

FROM SAIGON TO HANOI...
A Marvel of Culture, Cuisine, Captivating Beauty
and World-Class Service



HO CHI MINH CITY

I am paralyzed with fear, standing on a sidewalk in Ho Chi Minh City, which the locals call Saigon. There is an endless stampede of motorbikes but no traffic lights, stops signs or pedestrian crosswalks. Each time I step out to cross the street, another motorbike almost clips me.

A man pedaling a small 3-wheeled tourist cyclo pulls up in front of me. "Where you want to go? I take you. I am guide."

"I have a guide coming to my hotel in ten minutes. I just want to cross the street," I say. "I take you on ten-minute tour," the guide offers.

"I just want to cross the street," I repeat.

"Okay, hold onto my bike." I grasp his bike and he leads me safely across. He turns to me. "You either must cross very slow, or you put your hand here [he places his hand on his heart] and cross fast."

Vietnam has five-star hotels, delicious food and some of the most exotic cultural attractions in the world, but Ho Chi Minh City has scary street-crossing problems. I was worried they'd hate me because of the War, but they moved on long ago. Now, they live with a socialist market economy and have invited the world to invest in the new Vietnam. If only we could persuade them to invest in some traffic lights.

I look up at all the high rises of Ho Chi Minh City. In the last ten years, a new city has risen from old Saigon with nightclubs, bars, upscale air-conditioned shopping malls and luxury hotels, but there are still remnants of the old way of life. Locals still sit on kindergarten-sized red plastic stools on the sidewalk, slurping Pho (Vietnam's famous broth with noodles, spices and beef).

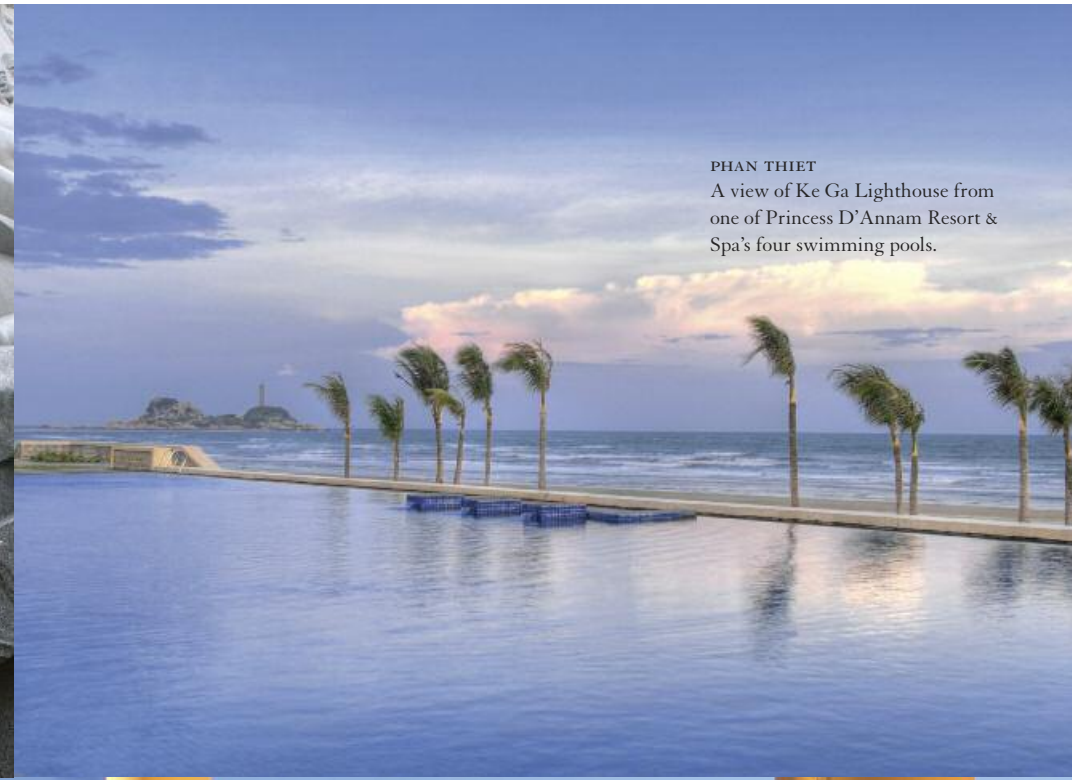
A woman in a conical hat walks by, a pole balanced on her shoulders from which are tied two heavy baskets. A man stands behind a cart whose sign reads: "Bunhbao banh uo + hamberger."



I head back to the 335-room five-star **Caravelle Hotel**, the unofficial press club during the War. My suite is spacious with a terrace, free Internet access and Club benefits including breakfast, beverages, cocktails and canapés. Best, it's located in the French colonial heart of the city. I wait in the lobby for my guide, who will take me to the Reunification Palace, Ho Chi Minh Museum, Notre Dame Cathedral and to the 150-year-old Ben Thanh Market.

At the market, shoppers squeeze past each other in the narrow aisles. A woman arranges grapefruit pieces into flower petals. A vendor scoops handfuls of sticky rice into palm leaves. A man pulls fresh noodles and hangs them on a string.

That night, I stand on my balcony and gaze down at the shimmering Opera House.



PHAN THIET
A view of Ke Ga Lighthouse from one of Princess D'Annam Resort & Spa's four swimming pools.



PHAN THIET
A view of the sun setting over Ke Ga Bay from Princess D'Annam Resort & Spa.

PHAN THIET

Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* said, "Charlie Don't Surf," but his sons do, especially in Phan Thiet, one of the windiest places in Southeast Asia. I am taking a kiteboarding lesson on the secluded beach of Ke Ga Bay with an instructor from the **Princess D'Annam Resort & Spa**. At this 57 stand-alone villa resort, each residence has latticed gates and screens that represent double happiness. I feel double happiness when I am finally able to control the kite. Afterwards, to reward myself, I head to the beachfront spa for a soothing 4-hand massage, then stroll through the Princess D'Annam's fragrant ginger garden to my Empress Villa duplex with an infinity pool in a private outdoor garden.

At sunrise, I am running down the beach just as the local fishermen arrive in their small round thatched boats and haul their catch to shore. "*Xin cho*," Hello, I say to the mothers and children who have come to help their husbands.

That night, I sip a fine Chilean LaPostelle while listening to the waves lapping. For dinner, the banana blossom salad, Perigord smoked duck and lobster are followed by Blue Lagoon mint chocolate ice cream with Blue Curacao and whipped cream. I stroll back to my villa under a universe of stars.





NHA TRANG

My next destination is the brand new five-star **Sheraton Nha Trang Hotel & Spa**. Nha Trang's bay, surrounded by four mountains, is considered to be one of the world's most beautiful. I check into my Ocean View Suite and look down from my balcony at the South China Sea. It's 11 a.m. and the beach is completely deserted. The locals prefer fair skin.

My guide escorts me to the ancient Po Nagar Towers built by the Cham culture, then to the Oceanographic Institute, housed in an historic French Colonial building. Touring can be exhausting, so back at the resort, I book a treatment at the Shine Spa and fall asleep while inhaling lemongrass, geranium, and lavender oil. I return to my suite, but wake up at 4 a.m., unable to get back to sleep so I go out onto my terrace and look down. The beach is packed, like Times Square on New Year's Eve. When the sun rises, the crowds will disappear.

Chef Nguyen Phat of the Sheraton Cooking School takes me by cyclo to the local Som Moi market, where he points out dragon fruit, rambutan, Jack fruit, and Durian. He shops, then we return to the demo kitchen and I learn how to make Pho, shrimp spring rolls, and fried caramel fish.



HOI AN
Celebrating Hoi An's ancient roots, the town turns off its street lamps and fluorescent lights on the 14th of every month, leaving the Old Quarter bathed in the warm glow of colored silk, glass and paper lanterns.

HOI AN

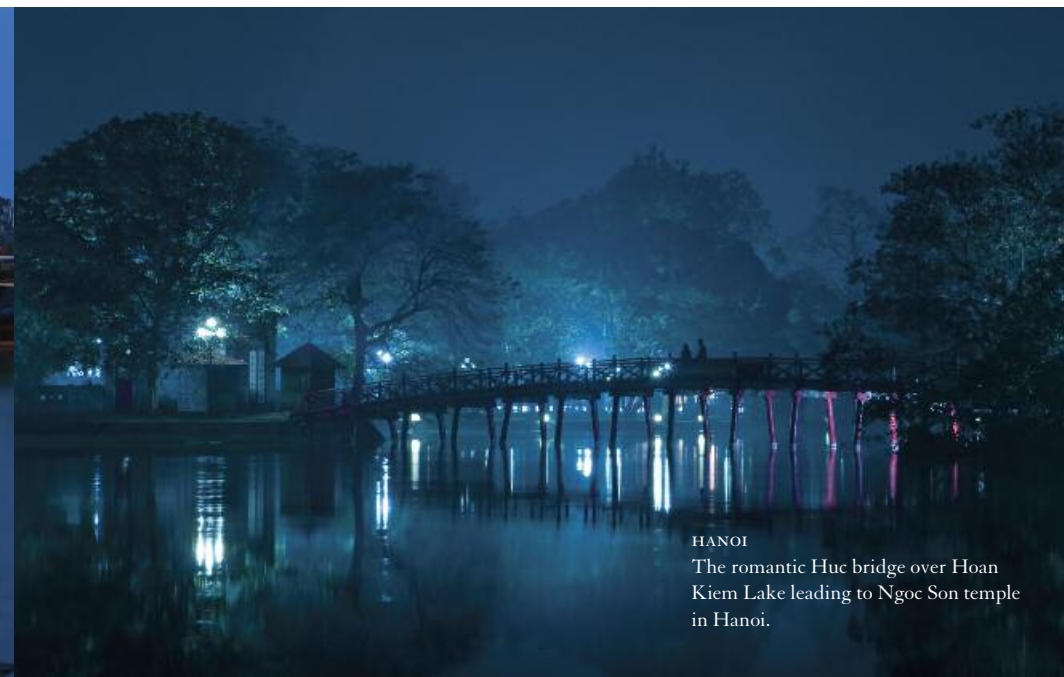
Hoi An, a UNESCO World Heritage site, dates back to the 15th century and is famous for its beautifully preserved houses, temples and Japanese Covered Bridge. Hoi An is also known for its tailors who will create anything in 24 hours. The tailor takes my measurements and that evening arrives at my villa at the **Nam Hai** for a fitting.

At the Nam Hai, possibly Vietnam's most beautiful resort, every villa is built on a raised platform as in a traditional Vietnamese Garden House. What I love most is my outdoor private shower garden and sea-facing veranda, and always having one of the three infinity-edged swimming pools to myself.

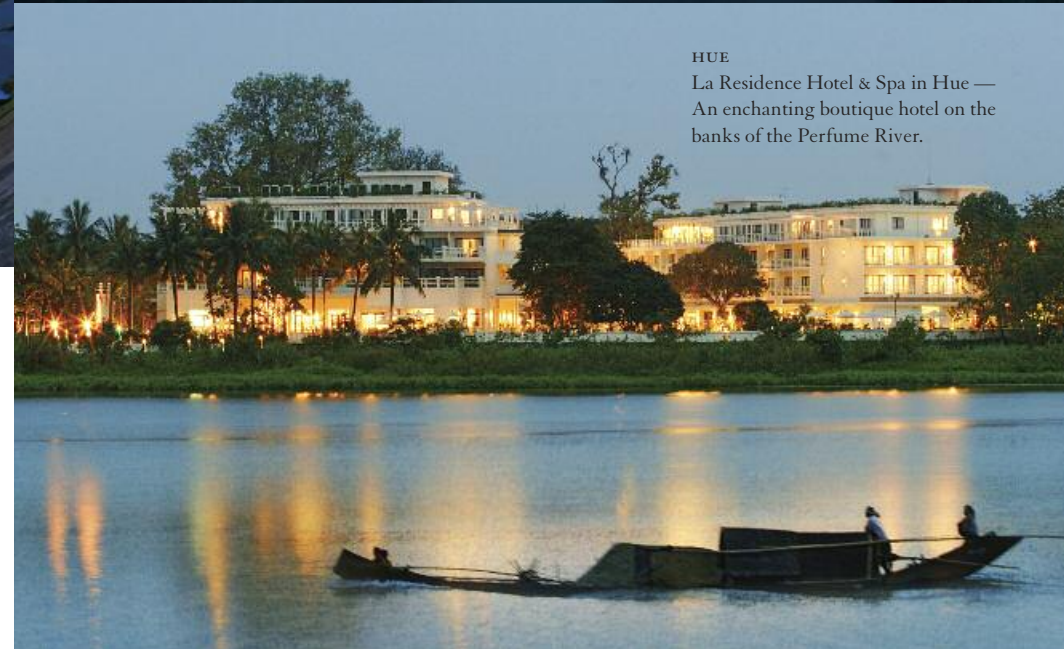
My guide arrives by motorbike with an extra helmet. I jump on behind him and we zoom past cyclos, bicycles and tour vans. This is the way to see Vietnam! We ride along narrow dirt trails past water buffalo,

rice paddies, to an organic garden and, finally, to Hoi An.

Later, I indulge in another 4-handed treatment at the Nam Hai Spa Pavilion. It seems to float above a lagoon filled with pink and white lotus flowers. I drift back to my room and the tailor arrives with my dress. It fits perfectly.



HANOI
The romantic Huc bridge over Hoan Kiem Lake leading to Ngoc Son temple in Hanoi.



HUE
La Residence Hotel & Spa in Hue — An enchanting boutique hotel on the banks of the Perfume River.

HUE

The most scenic way to get to Hue from Danang is by train. This UNESCO World Heritage City was built as a replica of Peking's Imperial City. At the train station, a uniformed bellman from the 109-room **La Residence Hotel & Spa** greets me and walks me the two blocks. Formerly the French governor's home, La Residence is straight out of Colonial Indochina with beautiful art deco furniture everywhere.

My suite overlooks both the Perfume River and the hotel's huge swimming pool.

My guide escorts me to the palace where Nguyen kings ruled for over 100 years, then onto Thien Ma pagoda at the exact time the monks are chanting. Last stop is the Poetry Pavilion at Tu Doc's tomb, overlooking a pond filled with lotus blossoms. I sit on the steps in the same spot where Catherine Deneuve sat in the film *Indochine*.

HANOI

The staff of the 364-room **Sofitel Metropole Legend Hanoi** all know my name. There's a gorgeous historical Metropole Wing and new contemporary Opera Wing with a Club Floor where I help myself to free-flowing food and beverages. My guide walks me through the streets of the bustling Old Quarter named for the products they sell, such as Silk Street, Votive Paper Street and Grilled Fish Street. I return to the Metropole's Spices Garden for my best Vietnamese meal: a tasting platter of Chef Hai's specialties.



HALONG BAY

No visit to Vietnam would be complete without an overnight boat trip to Halong Bay, possibly the most romantic place in the world, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site where two thousand limestone islets magically jut out of the emerald sea. I watch from the sun deck of the luxurious **Emeraude**, a 37-cabin replica steamer which evokes colonial Indochina. At sunset, I am still there, sipping a cocktail and trying to memorize the beauty around me on my last perfect evening in Vietnam.

