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Leverage THE HERITAGE

Hotels in Vietnam are learning to trade on their colourful past to further their 21st century ambitions.

After the sun sinks among the limestone

karsts of Ha Long Bay, the stars come out, to pepper the night sky and to light up the silver screen on the sundeck of the *Emeraude* (www.emeraude-cruises.com), a near-replica of a paddle wheel steamer that plied these waters between 1906 and 1937. Midway through that evening's film, the French epic *Indochine*, a ribbed-sail Chinese junk glides through these same waters, and several of the two-dozen *Emeraude* passengers consult each other, wondering perhaps if they'd sailed that passage earlier in the day.

Throughout Vietnam today, hotels and resorts are peddling yesterday's appeal to today's guests. That's nothing new. What is new is the way the hospitality industry has taken it upon itself to promote history in the year 2011.

"Hotels can't be passive stage sets for a traveler's experience," says John Tue Nguyen from Trails of Indochina (www.trailsofindochina.com), a popular tour operator in the region. "They've got to provide an element of direction, as well, whether by dint of design, heritage, or the art and culture of the region. People don't want to just stay somewhere; they want to be engaged by it."

Where steering guests into day tours and on excursions

used to sum up a hotel's role in promoting heritage, the demands of leisure travelers have changed in recent years. One of those changes is the desire to experience local culture in one's accommodations. If a guest returns from a day trip immersed in the country's wonders, the hotel must either carry on the enchantment, or risk breaking the spell.

Nguyen says the hotels leading the pack in Vietnam today are those able to bring local experience to guests on-site. He cites La Residence's painstaking restoration of its original art-deco furnishings, and the Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham suites in the Metropole Hanoi (www.sofitel.com) as examples. Nguyen believes even a young hotel can position itself well by weaving strong ties to history.

The *Emeraude* and its nightly airing of the French epic, *Indochine*, is a textbook example of that dynamic. A cruise on the eight-year-old replica is the highlight of many a visitor's trip to Vietnam. Yet the original steamer itself rests in the depths of the bay, a forgotten piece of the country's history until 2004, when its namesake set sail on the same waters, this time weighed with tourists rather than post.

Artful Renderings

The Emeraude is not the only popular property to have an identity mined from a distinct moment in Vietnam's history, but it is one of a handful of hospitality properties that are utilizing art to fill the last intangible gap in their guests' experience.

"There's a growing segment of savvy travelers who want to experience countries on a deeper, more enduring level," says Chris Duffy, general director of the **Life Resorts** (www.life-resorts.com). "By presenting aspects of local heritage on site, we help visitors make the authentic connections they're looking for."

Fred Wissink, a 33-year-old photographer from Canada seems to slide into the category described by Duffy. A Mac user and Minolta collector, he's dropped into the Heritage Bar at Life Heritage Resort Hoi An this evening, following a beach trip to nearby Danang.

"They're building hotels like crazy on the strip out there," he says, gazing up at one of the bar's brass lamps. "But even with its quirks, I much prefer the character of the Old Town."

As a UNESCO Heritage Site, the former port city of Hoi An is spared the real estate mania taking place just a few kilometers away from its moss-growing stone streets. In the wake of Vietnam's rapid development, many repeat tourists have been taken with a severe case of nostalgia. For them, well-preserved cities like Hoi An are a haven; a place where the bold march of progress peters into a leisurely amble.

While outside, a crop of modern boutique hotels make forward strides with clean minimalist lines and state-of-the-art pool villas, in 2009 the Life Heritage Resort proudly took two steps backward, hanging the walls of its Heritage Bar with a rare collection of medium-format, black-and-white photographs of Hoi An taken during 1950s and 60s. Alongside images of the town's quiet, tree-lined streets, are those of the people who carved a living on the banks of the Thu Bon River: weavers and jewelers hard at their craft, laborers waiting for a fare, fishermen casting their nets at dusk.

"The lighting is exquisite," Wissink says about one of the shots, "but it's the subject matter that's really arresting. You're feel that you're looking through a sort of time warp; yet it's interesting to see how little has changed."

Much More Than War

Six hundred kilometers and a world away from the Heritage Bar, in teeming Ho Chi Minh City, the Saigon Saigon Bar at the **Caravelle Hotel** (www.caravellehotel.com) perches over evening traffic in Lam Son Square. In the quiet minutes before the dinner rush, it's difficult to picture the bar filled with journalists, the echoes of explosions rather than motorcycle horns wafting from below. Difficult, until one picks up the hotel's recently published book, *Caravelle – Saigon: A History*, which presents such images in full color and clarity for the reader.



Entering the Caravelle's bright, fashionable lobby, there's no indication the hotel was once a character in the grisly epic that made world headlines for more than a decade. *Caravelle – Saigon: A History* traces the transformation of Saigon from a backwater village into the "Paris of the East," the development of the city's hospitality industry (strongest selling point: air-conditioning!) and the hotel's role through the war's 15 nerve-racking years.

"The Caravelle's history makes it part of the fabric of Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam in a way very few hotels can claim," says John Gardner, the hotel's general manager. "The book is not just a vivid memoir; the revelation for most guests is that there's so much more to the story than just the war."

According to George Ehrlich-Adam of Exotissimo

Travel (www.exotissimo.com), this is a common insight relayed by Vietnam's visitors. "One of the main eye-openers for tourists is that Vietnam has had a rich history before the better known last two centuries," he says. "The country has its very own historical characteristics dating even further back than 1000 years."

Not surprisingly, some hotels are plumbing the country's depths for legacies that have little to do with conflict. One of these is the four-year-old **Nam Hai Resort** (www.thenamhai.com) in Hoi An, which put together a self-referential walking tour of its villas and grounds.

The Nam Hai, named 'Best Hotel in the World' by Travel + Leisure in its 2008 design competition, was conceived as a modern interpretation of the Vietnamese *nha ruong*, or "house of panels." Available as a podcast, the tour introduces guests to a plethora of well-mined information about traditional Vietnamese architecture, home life, and customs which were reflected in the design and construction of the

Nam Hai: its dropped ceilings, platform beds, even the choice of frangipani trees to line the pool.

"For many travellers, Vietnam requires a long, inter-continental haul," says John Blanco, general manager of The Nam Hai. "Once here, many of our guests don't wander far from the resort. Our Design Tour is an opportunity for these folks to get into the depths of Vietnamese culture without ever leaving the Nam Hai."

Dusting Off Colonialism

While many of the country's visitors are eager to absorb these relatively unknown aspects of Vietnamese life, tour operators admit a large slice of the country's tourists still arrive with eyes keen to make out vestiges of the last, deep-rooted war with America. Those who look beyond the battles usually set their sights on French Indochina.

The romanticism associated with this era is nowhere more alive than in the capital city of Hanoi. If there is any hotel in the country that can claim the historical birthright of French influence, it is the 110-year-old Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi. The hotel's familiar white façade, green shutters, aged wooden stairs, and exquisite furnishings transport guests back to the first half of the 18th century, when Hanoi was a flourishing metropolis, and the Metropole the favorite playground of its elite.

Yet even the Metropole – the most visible reminder of Hanoi's French heritage -- is in the business of showcasing its past for the sake of its guests. In 1999, Andreas Augustin, founder of The Most Famous Hotels in World organization, undertook a four-year search for pieces of hotel's history, which were scattered over a century and several continents.

Augustin's findings are showcased in a history book, *The Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi*, which can be found on desks in the Metropole suites -- edifying reading for any guests who have not yet been swept away by the Metropole's grandeur.

The book's pages are brimming with stories of visits by characters like Charlie Chaplin and Somerset Maugham, and serve up a delightful collection of old advertisements, photographs and postcards. Biographical excerpts round out Augustin's lyrical prose, shedding new light on old Hanoi.

Augustin describes the book, now in its fifth edition, as an ongoing history project. Kai Speth, general manager of the Metropole, underscores the book's relevance. "The Metropole is more than just an illustrious hotel," he says, "It is an integral part of the city and a landmark where many historical events took place. Augustin's book brings its story to life for contemporary guests to experience and enjoy."

The idea encapsulates what is best about heritage tourism: its ability to dust off what was thought lost, and set it in a place where it can be appreciated again.

If you're set on exploring Vietnam's most vibrant metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City, JJ Explorer Tours has a three day two night package that includes return economy class flights between Hong Kong and Ho Chi Minh City and two nights with breakfast at the Vien Dong Hotel. From HK\$2,348 per person, conditions apply. www.jjexplorertours.com/PackageDetail/?ID=2963

