

Hanoi: A City on the Verge

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Motorcycles and scooters, encumbered by towering bouquets of yellow and white flowers, whizzed by on the residential highway as we made our way into Hanoi from the airport under the cover of night. Despite the fact we arrived far past midnight, the city seemed to be in desperate need of these fast-moving floral arrangements. I turned to my driver and asked if the following day was a holiday. "Hol-e-day?" he responded with a lilt in his tone as he searched his limited vocabulary trying to recall the definition. "Festival? Celebration?" I supplied synonyms that might spark recognition. He laughed, finally understanding. "No, no. Everyday is hol-e-day!" Well, that sounded promising.



The next morning when I sidled up to a sidewalk café, my driver's words appeared to ring true. The tiny coffee shop was packed with white collar workers all perched on blue stools more appropriate in height for preschoolers than grown men. Despite the fact that nine o'clock had come and gone, they seemed in no hurry to get to the office. In their polo shirts and khakis, they sipped thick coffee spiked with condensed milk, briefly trading in their loafers and dress shoes for flip-flops so an itinerant shoe shine man could buff away the dust of the city. They glanced at their shiny shoes and even shinier watches before lighting another Marlboro and fiddling with their high tech phones. From the perspective of the sidewalk, work, it seemed, could wait.

In sharp contrast to the languid dawdling of the middle class in cafes across the city, the traffic of Hanoi is an animal unto itself. At any hour, a wall of scooters barrels around the Hoan Kiem Lake, jockeying for position amongst a hectic onslaught of rickshaws, cars and buses. Wherever they are headed, they sure are in a hurry. After considering the pedestrian logistics of crossing the street over a cup of sweetened coffee the consistency of motor oil, I braved the crush of oncoming traffic myself. Just making it to the other side in one piece turned out to be my greatest accomplishment of the day.

The rest of my time spent in Hanoi was a balanced tightwalk between the nerve-rattling frenzy and laconic relaxation of the streets and sidewalks, a dichotomy of activity that grasped – and retained – my interest from the first morning.

Hanoi is still very much a city that is holding on to the ancient past, while letting go of the more recent events of history. With a history that stretches back three millennia, the city still hosts a few crumbling remains of bygone civilisations that weren't destroyed during the war. The

Confucius-inspired Temple of Literature, built in 1076 AD, stands proudly on the back of the VND 100,000 note and also due west of Hoan Kiem Lake, the same body of water that is also the site of Turtle Tower, whose square, tiered walls date back to the 17th century. Radiating out from the lake is the Old Quarter. One glance at the colonial architecture is all you need to note the French influence from Hanoi's tenure as the capital of Indo-Chine early in the 20th century. A squat, skinny, terraced version of a tropical street that feels more New Orleans than Nice, the lanes around the Old Quarter are dotted with signs for questionable massages and Trung Nguyen coffee.

While much of the city was destroyed during bombing campaigns from the Vietnam War, Hanoi has rebounded over the last half century, repairing both the emotional and physical damage to the point where it's hard to find evidence that it even happened. While Hanoi still has a firm grasp on its past and lags behind other Asian capitals, it also seems to be tottering on the brink. Just across from the Old Quarter, skyscrapers are starting to rise and business centres are becoming crowded. Despite the fact it is already a tourist destination in its own right, Hanoi still has a slightly undiscovered feel to it.

Where to Stay: Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi



Hanoi's listing of five star hotels is surprisingly short for a city that makes it on to so many lists of travel destination hotspots, and new restrictions against building skyscrapers in the Old Quarter have stifled growth in the city's most touristy area. However, the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hotel has held court in the district for over a century now. Built in 1901, the French colonial hotel consistently ranks as one of the world's best hotels, and with its high standards of service and exceptional setting, it's no wonder. The historic wing combines colonial ambience with first class amenities, while the newer opera wing rises up around the exterior, creating a whitewashed backdrop to the tranquil pool area. For a crash course in local cuisine, try the lunch buffet at Spices Garden, the hotel's Vietnamese restaurant. You'll sample everything from *pho bo* to the sweet pudding known as *che*, giving you the confidence you'll need later when blindly braving the delicious street stalls. Before you leave the Metropole, make sure to clamber up to the tiny rooftop terrace and have a cocktail at sunset. You'll be in a different era with just one sip.

Web: www.sofitel.com



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Exploring North Vietnam



Halong Bay

With a name like 'Descending Dragon Bay', Halong Bay naturally conjures thoughts of grandeur. Add to that its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the world's seven natural wonders, and the expectations for the 1,500 square metre body of water are beyond high. The four hour drive from Hanoi – a bumpy journey over a road generously billed as a highway – leads you to the formation of limestone islets where you'll inevitably board a 'junk' for a day of cruising between islands and exploring the breathtaking underground caves and grottoes.

While most locals live on dry land, there are several floating villages on the bay, so make sure whichever junk you do board has at least one of them on the itinerary. The most famous, Cua Van, has a population that tops out at about 700 people, most of whom make their living through fishing. Famous for their vocal talents, you'll be lucky if you hear them singing *ho bien*, or a traditional song sung out to boats, as you cruise through the maze of bobbing homes.

Where to Stay:



While you can settle for any sea-faring vessel to ferry you between tourist sites, Emeraude Cruises sets the standard for luxury on the bay. Designed as a diesel replica of a steamer that cruised the same waters from 1906 to 1937, the 38 cabin vessel offers a taste of the Old World, but with all the modern amenities to make you feel comfortable. Passengers can enjoy made-to-order crepes while lounging on the turn of the century sun decks, then duck downstairs to the dining room for a Vietnamese spring roll making class. If you stay the night, the ship drops anchor outside Hang Trong, or Drum Cave. Named for the sound the wind makes as it echoes through the stalactites and stalagmites, you'll be lulled to sleep by the natural symphony and the boat's gentle rocking.

Web: www.emeraude-cruises.com



Sapa

Located in northern hill country, Sapa is just a stone's throw from the Chinese border, so if you're crossing overland through Kunming or Nanning, the village is a good starting point for your Vietnam trip. Whether you're coming from China or Hanoi, your first stop is Lao Cai's bustling train station before heading up the winding roads of the Tonkin Alps where the elevation provides a welcome respite from Vietnam's tropical temperatures.

With emerald rice terraces as far as the eye can see, the possibilities for hiking are endless. Rent a scooter and buzz your way up the mountain to find random villages and hiking trails, or just set off on foot to the ethnic village of Cat Cat. You'll wander with pigs and the occasional water buffalo through cottage industries set up alongside a wooden path. Once you cross the falls, things can get a bit muddy and there are a few detours where you can wander off the beaten path. Make sure you wear shoes with good soles or hiking boots – slipping is part of the experience here.

In addition to the lush hillsides that make Sapa so photogenic, the locals here play a big part in the village's draw. Almost 85 per cent of the population is made up of ethnic minorities like the Hmong, Dao and Kinh tribes, notably dressed in their cultural garb. With just over 3,000 people who call it home, Sapa's only real industry is tourism, and the locals sell their trinkets, like silver bracelets and embroidered pillowcases, to make a living.

Where to Stay:



The Victoria Sapa Resort & Hotel sits just above the city, overlooking the cloudy vistas from its four star accommodations. Each of the mountain chalet rooms offers a touch of local flavour with hand-crafted scarves and knitted hats welcoming you to the region. Settle in next to the fireplace and sample hill country flavours at Ta Van. The restaurant offers tasting menus that incorporate Vietnamese, Cambodian and French flavours while highlighting some of the local ingredients from the fertile mountainside. And the best part about the Victoria? The luxury starts from the moment you set off from Hanoi aboard the Victoria Express. With two sleeping cabins and one dining cabin, the train brings romance back to the rails.

Web: www.victoriahotels-asia.com