



# hip, hip hanoi

Bustling and colour-drenched, Vietnam's capital is a vibrant city of contrasts

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BELINDA JACKSON

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES



## inside info

**MONEY MATTERS** \$1 = about 11,600 Vietnamese Dong (VND). Coffee, about \$1.50. One-litre bottle of water, about \$1.



**<< BEST BUY** A tea set, including a tiny pot with bamboo handle and a set of small cups made of celadon, a porcelain with a delicate green glaze. Every sip, and you'll think of Hanoi.

**DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT...** taking a sightseeing tour

round Hanoi on a cyclo – a genteel mobile lounge chair. Feel the wind in your hair and eavesdrop on the locals as they gossip in the traffic.

**BEST OVERNIGHT TRIP** Halong Bay, 170km east of Hanoi, is a must-see destination, best done over two days. Book an overnight cruise so you can sleep on board and wake up the next morning bathed in the incomparable serenity of this emerald bay that has thousands of limestone islands, some crowned with solitary pagodas, most uninhabited. Try the French-owned replica paddle-steamer, the *Emeraude*. Emeraude Cruises, call (0011) 84 4934 0888 or visit [www.emeraude-cruises.com](http://www.emeraude-cruises.com).

**TRAVEL FACTS** Travel Indochina runs a seven-day *Taste of Vietnam* tour exploring Hanoi, the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Call 1300 138 755 or visit [www.travelindochina.com.au](http://www.travelindochina.com.au).

The eight-armed intersection is a sea of bicycles, mopeds, pedestrians and the occasional taxi. The din of a hundred motorbike horns is deafening. Without warning, a battalion of soup carts shimmies in, all the traffic shifts one degree to the right, and slithers on as one sinuous animal. I'm expected to add myself to the mix.

"You cannot stop, you cannot run. If you stop and turn, you're a sitting duck," says a local, who is ostensibly coaxing me to cross the confluence, but has succeeded only in giving me a facial tic. Hanoi is not your lie-on-the-beach kind of holiday destination.

I look around for my usual saviour in this situation – an elderly woman in religious garb – but there's nary a nun to be seen. Instead, my salvation is delivered in the form of a souped-up Jason recliner on wheels.

In Hanoi, cyclos, as these moving armchairs are known, are the only way to travel. They're a squishy lounge chair with a striped canopy overhead and a grinning cyclist propelling you from behind. It's slow enough to take photos, but still utterly exhilarating to be part of the teeming streetscape whose individual components move as though blessed with collective thought, often with not even a traffic light to control the flow. Road rage? Well, those young gals on motorbikes in their long skirts and elbow-length white gloves might be cursing behind their pollution masks, but I doubt it.

The cyclo driver starts his commentary as we wheel through Hanoi's Old Quarter. Each of the 36 streets that make up the region retain a name of the guild that set up shop there – silk, tin, bamboo, silver, gravestones... To the left is Hang Gai, which translates as 'silk street', the beating heart of the city's frenetic

**TOP LEFT** Motorbike riders weave through the narrow streets of Hanoi's Old Quarter in one of the most stimulating ways to get around town.

**TOP RIGHT** Looking forward: war widows celebrate the end of colonial rule by the French annually on Independence Day, September 2.

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY (BOTTOM RIGHT) TRAVEL INDOCHINA

In Hanoi, cyclos... are the only way to travel. They're a squishy lounge chair with a striped canopy overhead and a grinning cyclist propelling you from behind

clothing industry. You still can't miss this strip, which is lined with custom and ready-made clothes. Women smile from their doorways, offering to whip up an elegant *áo dài*, the traditional long tunic and fitted trousers, for as little as A\$27. The driver pulls on the brakes, I leap out and grab a few silk scarves, then the armchair slips back into the traffic.

Hanoi could well be one of Asia's prettiest capital cities, with its calm lakes and intricate streets that date back a thousand years. Walking through the city is like cutting through layers of history, where ornate, turn-of-the-century buildings face vast Soviet-era squares and serene, ancient pagodas, which housed the first universities back when the Brits were still living in mud huts.

Hanoi is not a modern, cookie-cutter city of high-rises, subways and shopping malls, separated from a hundred other Asian cities only by language and gross national income. It remembers its past, and it's refreshingly gritty.

Instead of sniping quietly about 'that' war, visitors eagerly snap up old propaganda posters and badges from the Communist era, and the prison that held American POWs is now a compellingly gruesome museum complete with authentic instruments of torture (including a guillotine, one of the French's less savoury legacies) and photographs of its most famous resident, US Senator and 2000 presidential hopeful, John McCain. Yes, the locals are suckers >

**TOP LEFT** Vibrant venture: lantern sellers wait for a sale in a typical Hanoi shop, featuring narrow fronts, colourful displays and exotic wares.

**TOP RIGHT** Elegant architecture: French colonial buildings and balustrades line Hoan Kiem Lake, where the locals love to promenade.

## dining out

**PALATE PLEASER** Green Tangerine

This culinary venue in the Old Quarter reminds you you're not at home. How often do you sit in a 1928 French colonial villa polishing off French cuisine infused with a dash of Vietnamese? 48 Hang Be, Old Quarter, call (0011) 84 4825 1286.

**EUROFUSION** Koto

This cool restaurant is run by Australian-Vietnamese dynamo Jimmy Pham. The restaurant takes kids off the streets and trains them in hospitality. It serves tasty Vietnamese and European dishes. 18 Hang Quat Street, Hanoi, call (0011) 84 4828 8703 or visit [www.streetvoices.com.au](http://www.streetvoices.com.au).

**GO LOCAL**

Pho (pronounced 'fur') is Vietnam's staple breakfast – a steaming bowl of rich bouillon, long noodles, fresh herbs, chilli and lime. Metropole's head chef Didier Corlou suggests eating houses in the Old Quarter, including 2D Ly Quoc Su, 12 Nha Tho and 31 Hang Hanh.





## city secrets

**BEST MARKET EXPERIENCE** Anywhere in the 36 streets that comprise the city's Old Quarter. The streets are named for their ancient specialities: silk, tin, bamboo, gravestones... The area around the old cathedral is where the upmarket homewares and antiques stores congregate, with fashionable Nha Tho a must-visit strip.

**BEST SHOPPING STREET** Hang Gai in the Old Quarter translates as 'silk street'. Got your blood pumping yet? It's the strip for silk and ready-made and custom clothes. We had good results from Thuy Ta Company, 97 Hang Gai, call (0011) 84 4825 5839.

**BEST HOMEWARES STORE** You won't be able to keep your hands off the rich fabrics and subtle textures of the silk duvets and cushions from Mosaïque. Prices are fixed, and the quality is sensational. 22 Nha Tho, call (0011) 84 4928 6181. When Hillary Clinton went shopping in Hanoi, she ended up at Dome Interiors, which gets the thumbs up from the expats as the place for anything from linen to lamps. Dome Interiors, 10 Yen The Street and 51 Kim Ma Street, call (0011) 84 4843 6036.



Walking through the city is like cutting through layers of history, where turn-of-the-century buildings face vast Soviet-era squares and ancient pagodas

< for the cult of the celebrity, demonstrated by the many photographs of Hillary and Bill Clinton spattered across town from their 2001 visit.

Away from the tightly knit streets of the Old Quarter and the lake is the quieter, more genteel diplomatic circle, where crumbly yellow stucco French colonial villas are in a perpetual face-off with the massive concrete block that, despite his last wishes, is President Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. Like Lenin in Moscow, Vietnam's communist father of unification is mummified and lies in the centre of his city.

When inside, a bevy of youthful, po-faced guards look sharply for any signs of disrespect, such as speaking, stuffing your hands in your pockets or leaving your hat on. No naked shoulders and no knees, either, or you're out on your ear. A quick walk around the perimeter of his glass coffin reveals the corpse of a fine-boned, peaceful looking old man, floodlit to an iridescent orange, who's still loved by a nation.

Set in the centre of a great concrete field, this exemplary form of USSR architecture is in vivid contrast to Ho Chi Minh's own home, now a museum, which is a simple timber dwelling that he maintained was all he needed, despite his venerated position.

Bright gardens surround the house, which sits on Hoan Kiem Lake. Around it, Hanoi's citizens promenade, children skip, old men gossip and laden >

**TOP LEFT** Luscious lychees: exotic fruits fill an open-air stall at a food market and give a taste of the local experience.  
**TOP RIGHT** Cultural shopping: souvenir water puppets are available at the Temple of Literature. The Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe still performs this traditional art.



## hot hotels



### << BLOW THE BUDGET

#### The Sofitel Metropole

The 228-room Metropole is the grand dame of Hanoi's hotels. Set in a French colonial building, it's long been the preferred hang-out of celebrities. Don't miss the cooking school with a market tour. Rooms from \$190/double, call 1300 656 565 or visit [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com).

### MID-RANGE

**The Church Hotel** Located in one of the Old Quarter's most fashionable streets and a few minutes from Hoan Kiem Lake, the 26-room hotel takes its name from nearby St Joseph's Cathedral. There are baths in every room and views across the city or out onto the cathedral. 9 Pho Nha Tho, from \$55/double, call (0011) 84 4928 8118.

### BUDGET

**The Classic Street Hotel** Simple, clean, cheap and in the Old Quarter... this hotel's foyer is a restful haven of statues and plants, and there are 15 rooms, some with balconies, from \$30, including breakfast. 41 Hang Be, call (0011) 84 4825 2421 or visit [www.classicstreet-phocohotel.com](http://www.classicstreet-phocohotel.com).

Inside, a bevy of youthful, po-faced guards look sharply for any signs of disrespect, such as speaking, stuffing hands in pockets or leaving your hat on

< cyclists do a fast trade in cold drinks and hot pho, Vietnam's staple breakfast – a steaming bowl of spicy, sour noodle soup. Everyone's selling it, from the numerous tiny shopfronts to a guy on a bicycle in front of us, with his little umbrella and sloshing metal panniers.

A gentler introduction to Vietnamese cuisine is via the Metropole Hotel's cooking school with head chef, Frenchman and long-term Vietnam resident Didier Corlou, who drags us through the dark, steaming, covered markets looking for his ingredients. Arms flailing, nose quivering, he powers on, a full head and shoulders taller than anyone else, prodding fish, squeezing sea urchins, inhaling the scent of a mangosteen. He hovers over buckets full of scales and tails, a hundred black eyes staring back. Most of the things he holds up for show-and-tell get but a blank look from the rest of us.

Later that afternoon, having slept off the petite fours that completed the post-cooking class meal (a far more savoury French leftover), I leave the hotel for a few last-minute gifts and to pick up the dress I'd ordered on Hang Gai.

"Taxi, madam?" asks the concierge. But a passing cyclo driver slows at the prospect of a fare, and I leap on board, wriggle into position and I'm back into the throes of this vibrant Vietnamese city, observing from the comfort of my moving armchair. ■

**TOP LEFT** A magnificent mausoleum: President Ho Chi Minh's final resting place is an example of classic Soviet architecture.

**TOP RIGHT** A city of cyclists: bicycles are a common form of transport in Hanoi for locals. Travelling by bike or cyclo is a must for visitors, too, as it's a great way to see the city.