

Unforgettable Vietnam



In a country where the bike is king we prove
you don't need to ride one to fall in love with
Vietnam

Words: Janet Myers

Images : Jonathan Myers



SEA SNAILS ON
THE BBQ



EVERY THING
GOES BY BIKE

HO CHI MINH

Sizzling on the BBQ were giant sea snails the size of tennis balls and whole octopus glistening with the sheen of oil and freshly squeezed lemons. All manner of meat had been threaded onto skewers and judging from the red chillies in some of them they would set our mouths on fire. There were fruits and vegetables we had never seen before and an aroma which was enough to make anyone feel hungry. Everything was fantastic and fresh - much of it still alive only minutes before. The night was warm and balmy and the strings of blue lights which were festooned in the trees gave it a magical feel. This was our first night in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and this was a food festival just across the street from the comfort of our resort. The eleven hour journey from London had passed quickly and catapulted us forwards seven hours and after freshening up at our hotel we had begun to feel hungry. It was then that we had noticed the activity in the park. In many ways it was a perfect introduction as food dominates every aspect of Vietnamese life.

We woke the following morning to discover that next to their love of food is their love for their bikes, mopeds and motor scooters. The whole city buzzed and pulsed with them. Its inhabitants do everything with the aid of them, whether it be



VIETNAMESE IN TRADITIONAL
COSTUME

THE MARKET PLACE



PHO BO SOUP

LOTUS PICKER

INCENSE BURNING



taking pigs to market or moving house, taking the entire family for a spin or transporting enough firewood to keep a restaurant furnace burning for a week! Most visitors join them (even Jeremy Clarkson) and hire some kind of two wheeled conveyance but when you don't have a pair of strong legs it is not a good idea.

Public transport and accessibility are not disability friendly despite the large number of war veterans

who display many handicaps. We easily however enlisted the services of an English speaking taxi driver who agreed to show us the city over the next few days. With our money going a long way it was extremely cheap. Bao could not have been more friendly and we marvelled at his ability to thread a route through the teeming bikes which seemed to be running like lemmings towards the sea only to be crisscrossed by others

headed in another direction. We promised him a good tip if he refrained from taking us to places where he might get a commission and it worked well. Outside the famous post office we stopped and watched a newly married couple posing for wedding photos. A popular choice we were told! It looked as though even the bride and groom had arrived by bike.

At lunch time we stopped for the most famous noodle dish in Vietnam - the Pho

Bo. A beef soup with rice noodles in a rich broth, topped with finely sliced beef and bright green spring onions. You could call it the national dish - it is eaten by all at any time of day. We did however refrain from trying the pickled insects and animals which are considered a delicacy and are to be found in profusion on the shelves. We passed too on the snake blood vodka which received its crimson colour as the heart of a snake was plopped into it.

Hoi Chi Minh or Saigon as it is still called locally is a Mecca for shopping enthusiasts so we ended the day with some exploration of our own. We visited one of the giant western style malls but it was the hustle and bustle of the organized chaos at Ben Thanh market that really enthralled us. Here you can buy almost anything. We especially liked the stalls

THE POST OFFICE

AT THE CU CHI TUNNELS

CAO DAI TEMPLE

crammed with fabric of every conceivable hue and pattern. The narrow cubicles were only 2 metres wide and within their copious length the sellers, slept, ate and carried on with their everyday lives while they still sort to entice in customers and make a sale.

Next day saw us visiting the war museum. Safety laws aren't quite the same here and you get to shoot AK-47's and M16 Machine guns with live ammunition ! We passed on the The cu chi tunnels as they are not suitable for visitors who are not slim and supple. They are narrow and very claustrophobic . Instead we visited Thien Hau Pagoda which was built in the nineteenth century to honour Thien Hau the goddess of the sea. Local worshipers placed joss sticks into giant incense urns and the air was filled with sweet smelling smoke which wafted skywards

The following morning we visited the Cao Dai temple. It is a long drive from the city but well worth a visit. The colour and splendour breath taking. We arrived at mid day so we were able to witness the devotees at prayer. We stopped for another steaming frothy coffee on our return journey. Coffee shops, baguettes and pastries being a legacy of the French settlers.

Further sightseeing was interspersed with spa treatments and massages as it is hot in the south so whenever we went inside the blast of cool air from the air conditioning was always welcome. By day five we decided to fly further north where we knew the weather would be cooler. A train journey we were advised would not be a good option and with internal air flights cheap we took the short flight around noon the following day and arrived at our next destination in time for an evening meal.

HOI AN

It was the traditional lanterns that really excited me here. You can't miss them and when night falls the lantern market is ablaze with their vibrant colours and diverse shapes. They are made mostly of silk and brocade for durability and the stalls attract visitors like moths to a candle.





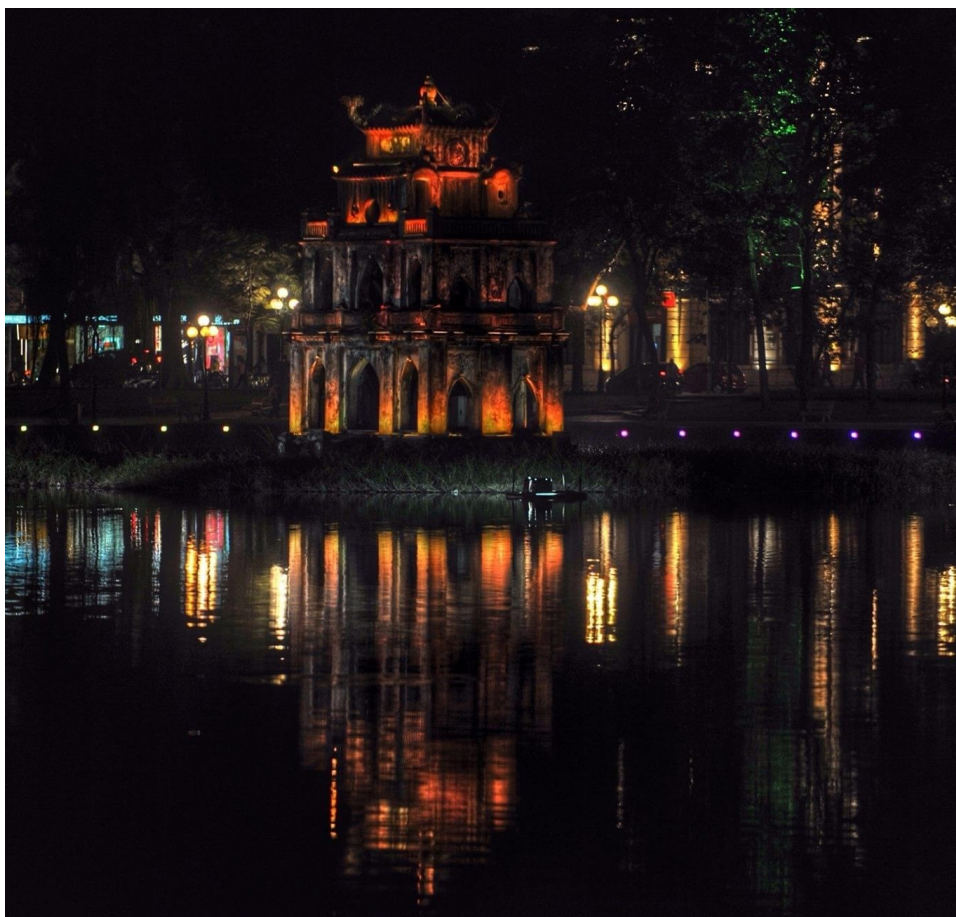
The low tiled roofs and narrow streets have a very Chinese feel as they are made of rare wood and decorated with boards and panels with carved pillars. Many houses have lanterns hung outside as they denote a warm welcome and a desire for happiness. There is also something very appealing here about choosing your restaurant for your evening meal as these too are festooned with their ambient light. On warm evenings you can dine outside with the lanterns hanging in the trees. Every 14th day of the lunar month another dimension is added. The bikes are banned from the centre and in the peaceful sidewalks near the Japanese bridge lighted paper lanterns are sold so that they can be floated down river. As we placed ours in the water we sent them off with our own wishes for happiness.

From here it is also possible to visit My Son which is set in a lush jungle valley. It consists of about 20 old temples but we took a trip on the river to visit local craftsmen and a trip into the surrounding countryside to see the paddy fields. Then it was another short flight to our final destination.



HANOI

Hanoi too has a rich French colonial past which is reflected in its architecture. The mile long Bien iron truss bridge spans the Song Hong or red river and Hanoi means literally "the city in the bend of the river". It's six million inhabitants ride six million mopeds and when we reached the bridge it seemed as if they all wanted to cross at the same time! Everyday life sprawls onto the pavement everywhere so walking for us was not an option. From washing to mending their bikes to stuffing a mattress and drying fish, it all happens outside with a coolie hat for protection



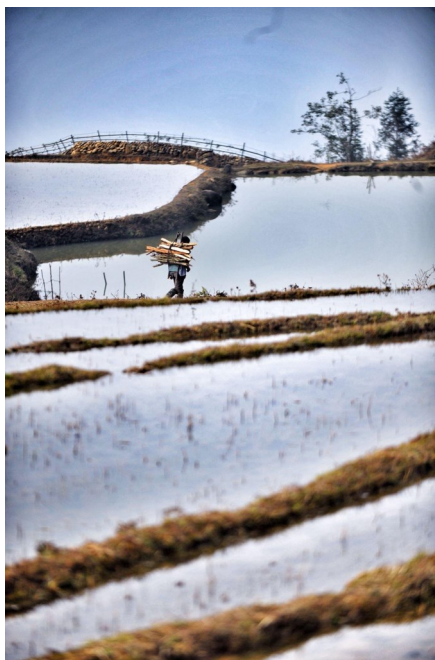
from the elements. Back in the 13th century guildsmen divided the old city into 36 areas. Each one selling a different merchandise so once you get the hang of finding what you are looking for it becomes easy.

Hoan Kiem Lake meaning “Lake of the Returned Sword” is one of the major scenic spots in the city. Nearby is the Thang Long Water Puppet Show which you must visit. The show which appeals to all ages, is charming and accompanied by a traditional Vietnamese pit orchestra. Order your tickets early in the day for the best seats. Our hotel booked ours for us. Giant fish and dragons fought with villagers and the entire performance lasted about 45 minutes. It was in Vietnamese but we picked up a leaflet which gave an insight into the story in English.

The largest of the city lakes lies to the northwest of the city. Long ago it was a branch of the red river but later as the river changed course it became a lake without access to the river. It is steeped in folk lore and locals enjoy telling the legend of the golden buffalo who they say was responsible for its creation.

In the centre of Ba Dinh Square Ho read the Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. A mausoleum marks the spot. The preserved body of Ho Chi Minh rests here. Other places worth a visit are the Presidential Palace and the House of Parliament and Hoa Lo Prison.

The night market stretches from Hang Dao Street to Dong Xuan Market. It is busy and alive with shoppers and a great place for souvenirs. It has plenty of atmosphere and lots of places to sample street fayre at the food stalls but it is not easy to negotiate. We therefore took a trip the following day to Bat Trang, a small village 13 kilometres south east of the centre which is famous for its ceramic pottery and bought a number of gifts for friends.



PICTURES FROM THE NORTH



For our final trip we had chosen to take a two day trip aboard a converted junk to Halong Bay. We were picked up from the hotel and given every assistance. We chose Bhaya cruises because they cater for the disabled and have larger rooms and a 24 hour room service but I think we would have been fine with other companies as they are quite happy to carry wheelchairs on board many of the boats and offer assistance to the less able.

HALONG BAY

We woke to the sound of water lapping around the boat and from our window looked out onto Halong Bay. What an experience. Dawn was breaking and the rising sun was casting swards of shimmering gold and red across the water. This was the stunning landscape which was featured in the James Bond film 'the man with the golden gun'. Rising from the water are some 1,600 islands and islets, forming a spectacular seascape of limestone pillars.

We had arrived in time to board for a fresh seafood lunch and the afternoons cruise took us past floating villages nestled among the limestone peaks. Up to fifty families live in any one of these numerous communities. They farm their fish and sell much of it to the passing tourists. Dogs and children run and play on the rickety planks which separate the fish pens. Always they have a smile for visitors.

That evening we watched the sun set as we sat on deck and then tucked into a great candle lit dinner. We spent the remaining hours before retiring talking to new friends while other passengers played board games and others went to watch a movie.

The following day we cruised across

HALONG BAY



Sung Sot Cave, one of the largest and most beautiful caves in Halong Bay. Some passengers took kayaks for a closer look. We also got to see the monkeys swinging in the trees on one of the islands. After brunch we cruised back to Hon Gai and by late afternoon we were back in Hanhoi

The next day gave us time to admire St Joseph Cathedral, The Royal Palace and the Grand Opera House and we followed it the next day with visits to temples and pagodas which were of historical significance. The Bach Ma Temple was of special interest. The tube houses also fascinated us. Their narrow frontage and long subdivided sections for the occupiers being the result of a tax which long ago had been levied according to a houses width. We had fallen in love with Vietnam.

Returning home it seemed strange to find life moving at a slower pace. Our trip had been a challenge but we had proved that you don't have to be able to ride a bike to fall in love with Vietnam. When summer comes and we get out the BBQ I know we will glance across at each other and as we tuck into our chicken we will remember those giant water snails. After all they tasted just like chicken!

