

HANOI

Explore, Eat, Drink, Shop

by Deb Obendorf

Hanoi is Vietnam's capital and second largest city by population (7.7 million in 2015). The city mostly lies on the right bank of the Red River. Hanoi is 1,720 km (1,070 mi) north of Ho Chi Minh City and 105 km (65 mi) west of Haiphong.

From 1010 until 1802, it was the most important political centre of Vietnam. It was eclipsed by Huế, the imperial capital of Vietnam during the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945). In 1873 Hanoi was conquered by the French.

From 1883 to 1945, the city was the administrative center of the colony of French Indochina. The French built a modern administrative city south of Old Hanoi, creating broad, perpendicular tree-lined avenues of opera, churches, public buildings, and luxury villas, but they also destroyed large parts of the city, shedding or reducing the size of lakes and canals, while also clearing out various imperial palaces and citadels.

From 1940 to 1945 Hanoi, as well as most of French Indochina and Southeast Asia, was occupied by the Japanese empire. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). The Vietnamese National Assembly under Ho Chi Minh decided on January 6, 1946, to make Hanoi the capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. From 1954 to 1976, it was the capital of North Vietnam, and it became the capital of a reunified Vietnam in 1976, after the North's victory in the Vietnam War.

WHERE TO STAY

Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi was first opened at the turn of the 20th century by two private French investors. Standing the test of time, the hotel has been recognized as Hanoi's legendary landmark for its contribution to the history and heritage of city. Ever since 1901, the Hotel Metropole Hanoi has a long tradition as a luxury venue for prestigious events and a popular rendezvous for business and leisure travelers. We have the honor to welcome such famous playwrights, actors, ambassadors and heads of state from all over the world as Charlie Chaplin, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham. (Out the back door of the Sofitel cross the street and you will come to the Press Club...see "special stops!")

SPECIAL STOPS

The Press-Club

One of the most distinguished business and culinary addresses in Vietnam, was founded in the late 90's as Hanoi's premier meeting and fine-dining venue, a place where dignitaries, entrepreneurs, businessmen and expatriates could interact and dine in a comfortable, elegant setting. Set above the famous Journalist Association, home to writers and journalists since the war, the place is intended as a tribute to the finest creations by the gesture of the hands, whether it be for writing words, lacquering wood, painting art, vinifying wine or cooking dishes. The Press-Club welcomes any guest all day every day from breakfast to late evening drinks. On Friday evenings in nice weather they have a roaring rooftop cocktail party, you will meet ambassadors, mercenaries, art collectors and CIA, it is truly a memorable group! They have a little deli with a few delicacies from the west like cheese and meats... their own Mulb's!

WHERE TO EAT

Cha Ca La Vong

Located on a narrow street in the old quarter, this restaurant takes its name from its one dish wonder: Cha Ca La Vong! With a sea green interior and a ladder disguised as a staircase to enter into the main floor, this is a place where English is rarely heard and you don't have to bother thinking about what you want; instead you receive what they have, which has remained the same for decades. A frying pan of fresh river fish will arrive at your table with a personal charcoal cooker. Accompanying this is a bowl of fresh rice noodles, peanuts and fresh herbs. As the fish starts to heat up and the smells of turmeric and dill start to bloom around you this is when you add the herbs into the frying pan (I personally like to add the peanuts at this time as well because I like them hot). Once you are satisfied that the herbs are cooked to your preference you take the fresh rice noodles and place them in your bowl, spoon up some of fish, herbs and flavored oil on top, add some fish sauce and chilies to further flavor (and a few more fresh herbs if that is your style) and enjoy!

Hanoi Social Club

Located on 6 Ngõ Hội Vũ, Hàng Bông, Hoàn Kiếm, Hà Nội, the Hanoi Social Club is an institution among expats and the in the know gen Xer's of Vietnam.

Spread out over three floors, with the third floor being an outside terrace, the Hanoi Social club has a rustic feel to it with beautiful wood furniture and rooms lightly decorated with Vietnamese art. The menu is full of fresh organic salads and light western inspired dishes, with just enough choice to satisfy your pickiest friend.

Cau Go

Situated on the sixth floor overlooking the watery oasis of Hoàn Kiem lake, you'll be rewarded with sweeping views of Hanoi at Cau Go. Located in the old quarter, its interior gives off an eclectic French Colonial vibe without trying too hard to be fussy. Lunch and dinner feature varied flavors and dishes from all parts of the country including Hanoi, Saigon and central Vietnam, with a contemporary twist. If you can, request an outdoor table for a lovely patio view of Turtle Tower and Hanoi's glittering lakeside.

Green Tangerine

When in the mood for a bit of fusion and romance, head over to the Green Tangerine. This restaurant has a French-inspired menu and one of the most beautiful hidden courtyards in the old quarter. I'll take a glass of red outside in the early evening when the daylight is just starting to fade. This ritual is followed by a fusion meal of soba noodle seafood pasta and a mesclun salad and then, naturally, a treat of French-made crème brulee.

Bamboo Bar at the Sofitel Metropole

The colonial vibe of the city is strong and you can be pulled without choice towards the epicenter of it all – the Bamboo Bar at the Sofitel Metropole. This bar to me sums up colonial elegance. Poolside, order some light tapas off the bar menu which includes popcorn shrimp served with a spicy red chili dipping sauce, some crudities and a cheese plate full of French cheeses that are just sharp enough to force me to follow my martini with a glass of rich French red wine. I like this bar. *I like this bar a lot.*

VIEWING AND BUYING ART

Galleries

- Mai Gallery, 3b Phan Huy Chu, (84-4) 825-1225, and 183 Hang Bong Street, (84-4) 8285854; www.maigallery-vietnam.com
- Apricot Gallery, 40 B Hang Bong Street, (84-4) 8288965
- Art Vietnam, 30 Hang Than Street, (84-4) 9272349
- Salon Natasha, 30 Hang Bong Street, (84-4) 8261387

- Gia Huy Gallery, 49 Hang Bong Street, (84-4) 9288746
- L'Espace Centre Culturel Français de Hanoi, 24 rue Trang Tran Tien, (84-4) 9362164
- Ryllega Gallery, 1 A Trang Tien, (84-4) 9332878; www.ryllega.com

On Purchasing Art

All galleries will ship art home for you, and there is no United States import duty on original works of art. There is a small customs fee for art leaving Vietnam, but that is included in the shipping price. A 100-square-centimeter painting, for example, would cost roughly \$150 to ship to the United States and should arrive within five to seven days. A larger lacquer canvas could cost as much as \$1,000 to ship. Beware that many of the lesser-quality “art shops” will try to convince you of a work's authenticity (forged copies of works by popular artists are common) by giving you an “exclusive right certificate.” Such a document means nothing, as the art industry is not regulated by the government.

SHOPPING IN VIETNAM

(1 VND = 0.00004 USD)

Ao Dai: Traditional Vietnamese Costume

The ao dai, widely regarded as Vietnam’s national costume for women, consists of a long tight-fitted dress that’s worn over slacks in contrasting colours. Although ready-made ao dai can be found in tourist-friendly markets and fashion boutiques, some travelers may require the service of a local tailor to get your costume fitted according to their body type. Hoi An, a picturesque city on Vietnam’s central coast is renowned its professional tailoring services, where you can choose from an extensive collection of fabric and have your very own custom-made ao dai for about VND 700,000 to VND 1,500,000.

Silk

Silk in Vietnam is made from the cocoons of silkworms using manual looms, and comes in a variety of patterns and colors. You can find plenty of fashion boutiques and souvenir shops selling shirts, ties, accessories, and dresses at relatively affordable prices. Unfortunately, counterfeit goods are very common in Vietnam, so the best places for authentic silk products are Hoi An Silk Village and Van Phuc Silk Village (about 10km southwest of Hanoi). A regular Vietnamese silk typically costs VND 70,000 per metre while premium fabrics are priced over VND 100,000 per metre.

Pearl Jewelry

Pearl farms are mainly found in coastal locations such as Ha Long Bay and Van Phong Bay, with Saigon Pearls widely known as the best place in Vietnam for authentic pearls and jewelry. Located in Nha Trang, this home-grown brand has several showrooms selling necklaces, bracelets, pendants, earrings, and rings at VND 3,000,000 upwards. If you're not a fan of pearls, accessories made with gold and colorful gemstones are available as well.

Conical Straw Hat: Non La

Buying one of these may seem novelty, but it's one of the most practical items for travelling, especially during Vietnam's downpours and scorching summers. Also known as non la, these hats have been around since the 18th century and are typically handwoven using bamboo, palm leaves, and the bark of Moc trees. Depending on the quality, conical hats sold at souvenir shops cost between VND 30,000 and VND 100,000 while local markets sell them for less than VND 10,000.

Lacquer Ware

Lacquer ware is a traditional form of craftsmanship commonly used on furniture, dishes, bowls, vases and paintings, which takes up to four months to produce. There are several galleries along Hang Bac Street in Hanoi and An Dong Craft Market in Ho Chi Minh City selling high quality lacquerware at reasonable prices, many of which depicting mythical creatures and the daily lives of the Vietnamese. Prices typically start at VND 200,000 for a saucer-sized product while lacquer paintings cost VND 2,000,000 upwards.

Hand Embroidery

Hand embroidery in Vietnam often depicts natural scenes and wildlife, though travelers can visit prominent craft centers and embroidery shops to have their very own personalized designs. Our favorite place for quality embroidery is XQ Hand Embroidery in Nha Trang, which specializes in silk apparel and hand-embroidered portraiture. It is built to resemble a Vietnamese village home (complete with a garden courtyard), where you can see locals in traditional clothes working on new pieces around the store. You can purchase a premade item for about VND 500,000, but if you have time, you can also have your portrait embroidered at the shop.

Propaganda Posters

Propaganda posters were used by Ho Chi Minh and the northern Vietnam government in efforts of rallying the troops and raising the spirits of the local population. Often painted on walls, trees and large vehicles during the Vietnam War,

these artworks feature colorful imagery and powerful slogans. You can easily find reproductions of propaganda posters in several art galleries along Hanoi's Hang Bac Street, costing between VND 500,000 and VND 800,000.

Original Vietnamese Art

Vietnam has many galleries where you can buy original art for prices that will not break your bank. Yes, all kinds of paintings which when rolled you can easily take with you on flights. The galleries are happy to do the rolling/tubing for you and these are easy to hand carry. Humor and color are primary features of many works of Vietnamese artists.

Ceramics

Vietnam has an age-old ceramic and pottery tradition and some of the products are very rich in details especially the wall frames which tell of local life or a story. The best of these pottery is in Bat Trang.

Also shop for coffee, dipping sauces and snake oil.