

Eastern ODYSSEY

Vietnam is establishing itself as a hotspot, with its elegant resorts, seductive beaches and sensational street food and culture

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AS FIREWORKS LIT UP THE SKY OVER THE LAKE IN HANOI'S OLD QUARTER, THE YEAR OF THE CAT OFFICIALLY BEGAN. Arriving on the eve of the Tet celebrations, we dived straight into Hanoi's bustle. Beneath a canopy of banyan trees, the pavements were strewn with people cooking steaming noodles, men welding metal with sparks flying, makeshift barber shops and street speakers blaring political messages.

The medieval Old Quarter, with its maze of streets, jumble of communist-style high-rises, imperial temples and hectic street life, remains its soul. But nothing prepares you for the anarchy of the roads, with motorbikes and scooters swarming in every direction. Between the tide of motorbikes, the virtually non-existent traffic lights and restaurants featuring cat and dog on the menu, north Vietnam is not for the faint-hearted.

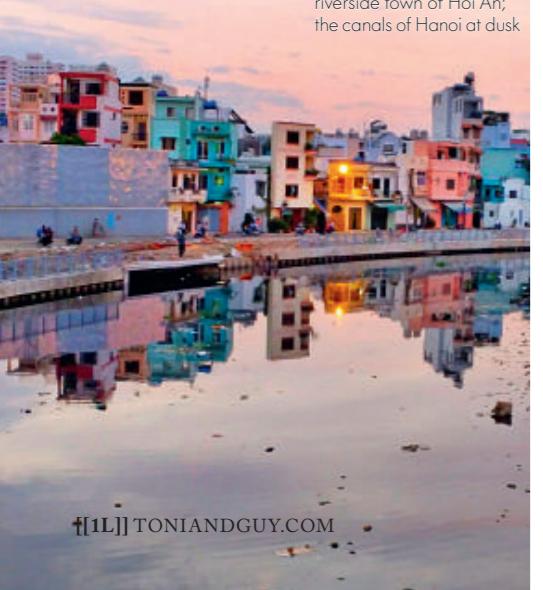
For years, the country has been tainted by memories of colonialism, the horrors of the American war, the failures of Communism. With its romantic blend of old Asia and French heritage, the

once-sleepy capital of Vietnam has evolved from a grim, ravaged place into a sophisticated metropolis with fashionable bistros and bars like Mao's Red Lounge – a smokey den playing rock classics and heaving with sociable young locals and travellers – where we stopped for happy hour and spring rolls.

Walking the tree-shaded avenues imagining what it must have been like in the 60s and 70s, we made the obligatory visit to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum – a Soviet fortress where the glass-encased, goateed corpse of the revered leader is still pulling in the masses. As we wander back into the street, the loudspeakers start again, reminding its citizens to pay their taxes. It's fascinating seeing a city at the crossroads of communism and capitalism, quaintness and anarchy.

In our 48-hour blitz of Hanoi, we swooned over graceful colonial villas, inhaled too much incense, bought US army paraphernalia and got lost in the backstreets of Chinatown for what seemed like eternity.

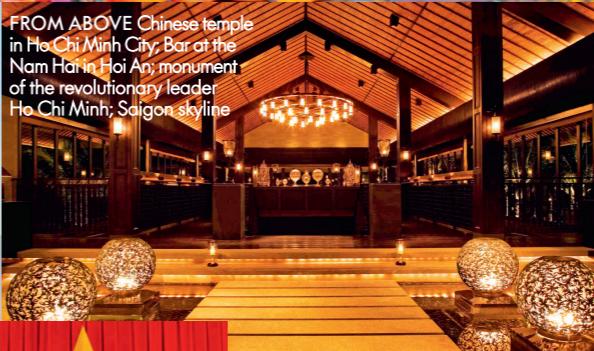
Later, in the hush of the storied Metropole Hotel, my husband and I planned our adventure to see as much of the country as possible in 10 days. On a rainy afternoon – after a day trip to Ninh Binh, a spooky backwater of misty ruins and rock caves in the Red River Delta –



FROM ABOVE The pretty riverside town of Hoi An; the canals of Hanoi at dusk



FROM ABOVE Chinese temple in Ho Chi Minh City; Bar of the Nam Hai in Hoi An; monument of the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh; Saigon skyline



FROM LEFT Princess D'an Nam Resort; Nam Hai Hotel; cows on the beach in Hoi An; Cham monastery in Phan Thiet; Saigon street life



we travel the old-fashioned way on the Reunification Railway, a steel artery running the length of the country.

Stepping out into the sunshine of Hoi An, we head to the Nam Hai, a gleaming new spa escape. A sleek affair of granite floors, dark woods and earthy colours, with the ocean in its backyard, the Nam Hai is a respite from the madness of Hanoi. Hoi An, a historic former trading town on a scenic riverside, is a magically preserved sleepy hollow of co-existing Asian cultures, with all the postcard-perfect elements of lantern-lit lanes, quaint courtyard cafés, Chinese shop-houses and the fascinating My Son ruins close by.

Since the Reunification train doesn't stop in Mui Ne, we take the terrifying sleeper coach. The drive through the buzzy beach town, with its red dunes, seems more like Africa. Facing the South China Sea, the Princess d'An Nam resort, a dazzling white palace set in bamboo and ginger gardens on a seductive swathe of sand, with surly-looking Russians floating about, is like something out of a Bond film. With the sea breezes and martinis flowing, it feels like we've been whisked away to our own tropical hideaway. Surrounded by pine forests and rice paddies, the hotel is blissfully isolated in Phan Thiet, an ancient Cham village, with little to do apart from languish and disappear from the world.

In the grey dawn light, we pulled into the station in Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon as the locals still call it. This is the wild, wild East. Few cities can match its youthful spirit and unpredictability. With only three centuries of history, compared with Hanoi's thousand years, HCMC has an electric energy teeming with manic street culture and six million motorbikes, some carrying entire families, pet dogs and caged parrots. After eight days of surviving swerving coaches and mopeds, I've perfected the art of wading through insane traffic with a fearless sprint and flick of a hand, like Moses parting the Red Sea.

The city is a patchwork explosion of colour: red-roofed pagodas and tumbledown shops join seamlessly with shiny skyscrapers. Every block shows off a blend of influences: the skinny tube houses, French follies, rundown Chinese godowns and global boutiques. At every turn, there's something unexpected: rambling markets laid out like Arab souks; tiny ponds filled with koi and turtles; hidden temples perfuming the air; and bonsai gardens given over to other deities.

Along the wide boulevards, there are flashes of Paris: Art Deco cafés and flower stalls spill onto pavements, bougainvillea splashes out from balconies and chic women weave past in shimmering silks. Drifting from one place to another, we try everything as it goes, street snacks, haute dining at the upscale Wild Rice and exotic cocktails at the dimly-lit Temple Club, the hangout of in-the-know foreigners and young Vietnamese scenesters. Our last hours are spent on the veranda of the Continental Hotel, where Graham Greene wrote *The Quiet American* and former GIs and politicos drank before Saigon fell. Vietnam is a wistfully beautiful, strange, crazy place. It's inspiring how the nation has moved on from decades of brutal conflicts and is forward-looking and flourishing ●