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Vietnam

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Halong Bay (p90)

VIETNAM

THE JOURNEY BEGINS HERE

I first visited Vietnam in 1991, when seeing a motorbike in Saigon or Hanoi was quite a rare sight and most people were pedalling their way around by cycle or getting around on foot. They were almost silent cities after dark. Today the energy and pace of these metropolises is astonishing, with a tide of two wheelers filling the streets and quiet corners can be challenging to find. So when out exploring I have a hit list of cafes, often on leafy side streets, where I can recharge with the uniquely Vietnamese caffeine and sugar kick that is *ca phe sua da* (drip coffee with condensed milk). Then I can decompress and reflect for a while before revving up for the next urban adventure: perhaps searching for the perfect *banh mi* (Vietnamese-style stuffed baguette).

Iain Stewart
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My favourite experience is gazing over fishers' coracles and oceanic rollers towards the **Cham Islands** from the shoreline on gorgeous An Bang beach, with a Huda beer for company.

WHO GOES WHERE

Our writers and experts choose the places which, for them, define Vietnam



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I've lived in Hanoi for years, but for me the **Old Quarter** (p72) never gets old. It's the medley of contrasts that keeps things infinitely interesting. New money collides with traditional values, storied heritage architecture surrounds, and tourists are everywhere. And yet the neighbourhood never sold its soul to tourism. I love gazing at St Joseph's Cathedral (pictured), perched on the porous border between Hoan Kiem and the Old Quarter, while swigging a glass of iced lemon tea.

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Born in Britain but based in Hanoi, Joshua writes about travel, culture and architecture.



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What screams Vietnam better than being in the midst of its jungle? **Phong Nha-Ke Bang** (pictured; p156) is a mysterious world that captivates anyone who ventures into its verdant realm. Covered in thick forest, carved by crystal blue rivers and riddled with deep caverns, the national park is a splendour to behold, with intriguing layers of history, culture and infinite potential.

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Diana is a Vietnamese-American who has lived in Vietnam since 2015. She is a copywriter and the owner of a dog hotel.

HANOI

A CITY ON THE MOVE

Vietnam's capital oozes character, with its hodgepodge architecture, anarchic traffic and a rambunctious population.

This historic city has one foot buried in a fascinating past, while the other strides confidently into the future. With many millions of motorbikes, it surges with the incessant din of blaring horns, while historical nuggets from periods of French rule and Chinese influence glint in the haze.

Explore the streets and alleys of Hoan Kiem and the Old Quarter, where craft families hawk their produce. Practise tai chi at dawn or play chess with goateed grandfathers at dusk.

Devour divine food at every corner, sample market wares, uncover an evolving arts scene and hunt down the perfect egg coffee. Meet the people, delve into the past and witness the constant evolution of a messy, beautiful, salmagundi of a city.

Emperor Ly Thai To moved his capital here in 1010 CE, naming it Thang Long (Ascending Dragon). The city was renamed Hanoi by Emperor Tu Duc in 1831, from the words *ha* (river) and *noi* (inside), referring to its position within a bend of the Song Hong (Red River). Hanoi served as the capital of French

Indochina before becoming a bastion of Vietnamese communism. During the American War, heavy US bombing destroyed parts of Hanoi and killed hundreds of civilians.

One of the prime targets was the 1682m-long Long Bien Bridge. US aircraft repeatedly bombed this strategic point, yet after each attack the Vietnamese managed to improvise replacement spans and return road and rail services.

It is said that the US military ended the attacks when US prisoners of war (POWs) were put to work repairing the structure.

Today the bridge is renowned as a symbol of the tenacity and strength of the people of Hanoi.

The city remains richly decorated with colonial and Soviet architecture, hidden-away temples and a honeycomb of small alleyways.

While voracious modernisation may have drowned out some of Hanoi's vibrant palette of Vietnamese, Chinese, French and Russian influences, many tempting islets of heritage remain in the churning sea of modern construction.



THE MAIN AREAS

HOAN KIEM LAKE

Hanoi's geographical and spiritual heartland. [p66](#)

THE OLD QUARTER

Labyrinthine ancient trading quarter. [p72](#)

THE FRENCH QUARTER

Boulevards, mansions, parks and lakes. [p78](#)

BA DINH & WESTERN HANOI

Grand monuments and local life. [p82](#)

WEST LAKE & TRUC BACH LAKE

Neighbourhood wanderings and international flair. [p88](#)

BEYOND HANOI

Legendary bays, pagodas and national parks. [p90](#)



Left: Train Street (p74) Above: Old Quarter (p72)

Find Your Way

On paper Hanoi is one of Southeast Asia's biggest metropolises, but it often feels more like a colossal cluster of gigantic villages. Hoan Kiem Lake is at Hanoi's heart, and from there the city fans out in all directions.



FROM THE AIRPORT

Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport is 35km north of the city, around 45 minutes away along a highway. Many hotels can arrange pickup for competitive prices. There's always a line of taxis out front (insist that they use the meter), as well as the orange 86 bus, which passes through the Old Quarter.



TAXI

You'll probably need a taxi or Grab (Southeast Asia's Uber) to get between neighbourhoods. You can flag down taxis almost anywhere – always ask the driver to use the meter. Download the Grab app to plot and price your journey.



BICYCLE

Motorbiking around Hanoi is only for the extremely well initiated, but some parts of the city make for reasonably pleasant cycling, such as around West Lake. Cycling or hiring a cyclo (a three-wheeled bike taxi) is also a way of getting to nearby attractions.



WALK

The best way to explore most neighbourhoods is with your own two feet. Traffic probably functions differently to how it does at home, so be sure to observe how local pedestrians navigate the streets before having a go yourself.



Plan Your Days

Hanoi might be huge, but moving between places of interest rarely takes more than half an hour. Don't forget to sit, drink, eat and watch the world go by – it's what Hanoi is all about.



Cyclo rider for hire (p62)



You'll Also Want to...

Explore the parks, drink loads more coffee and do some day or half-day trips outside of the city.



SLEEP SOMEWHAT SOUNDLY

Look for a boutique hotel in the **Old Quarter** and wake to a vibrant neighbourhood swirling around you.



CATCH A SHOW

Marvel at the interiors of the **Hanoi Opera House** by booking in for an evening performance.



GO CRUISING

Cruise **Halong Bay**, the quintessential day or multiday trip from Hanoi, with emerald waters, karst mountains and loads of activities.



CROSS THE TRACKS

Visit **Hanoi Train Street**, which makes for a fascinating Old Quarter activity – when the authorities allow it.



EAT AND DRINK LIKE A LOCAL

Return to the **Old Quarter** to eat and drink; the food and bar scenes can't be overstated.



EXPLORE EXPAT ENCLAVES

Enjoy **West Lake**, the centre of expat life, with leafy streets, cool cafes and an international dining scene.



ESCAPE THE CITY

Beyond Halong Bay, there are craft villages, ancient pagodas and national parks, such as **Ba Vi**.

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DAY 1

Morning

- Start with a pre-breakfast loop of **Hoan Kiem Lake** (p66), looking out for Ngoc Son Temple and **Turtle Tower**. Find some tasty **street food** (p70) for breakfast and then stop for some iced lemon tea in front of **St Joseph's Cathedral** (p68). From there head north and dive headfirst into the **Old Quarter** (p72) for lunch.

Afternoon

- Get lost in the alleyways, keeping your eyes peeled for hidden temples and atmospheric trading streets, such as **P Thuc Bac** (p77). Then discover why Hanoi is Southeast Asia's **cafe capital** (p400).

Evening

- Finish your first day with some **bia hoi** (fresh beer; p406).

DAY 2

Morning

- Begin by peeling back the layers of Hanoi's history in **Ba Dinh** (p82) at the **Imperial Citadel of Thang Long** (p85) and the **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex** (p82). Enjoy lunch in a restaurant on one of the neighbourhood's stately streets.

Afternoon

- Refuel in a cafe with character, such as **Manzi Art Space and Cafe** (p85), before heading north to **Truc Bach Lake** (p88) for some relative calm. Loop the lake, try some specialty snacks and visit **Tran Quoc Pagoda**. Linger for long enough and enjoy a fabulous sunset on a clear day.

Evening

- Dine in elegance in the **French Quarter** (p78).

DAY 3

Morning

- After breakfast, return to the **French Quarter** (p78) for coffee before visiting **Hoa Lo Prison** (p80) or the **Vietnamese Women's Museum** (p78). Then it's time to revisit the **Old Quarter** (p72) for another street food lunch.

Afternoon

- After lunch, go west to the **Temple of Literature** (p86) and then further west still to the **Museum of Ethnology** (p87). If you're going to the **northern mountains** (p90), a visit to this museum is essential. Their water puppet shows are also fun.

Evening

- Cocktail bar crawl around **Hoan Kiem** (p66) and the **Old Quarter** (p72) to round off your Hanoi experience.

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HOAN KIEM LAKE

GEOGRAPHICAL, CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL HEARTLAND

Linking the Old Quarter with the French Quarter is the city's most attractive lake: Hoan Kiem Lake, which serves as a handy cartographic reference point for the rest of the city. Explore the area at any time, though sunrise and sunset are particularly romantic for lakeshore wanderers and photographers.

The twin bell towers of St Joseph's Cathedral – Hanoi's most imposing chunk of church heritage – rise to the west of the water. Take in the scene of the church and the plaza in front through the steam of a cappuccino or with an iced lemon tea from an assortment of artfully positioned cafes. Another grandiose corner of French heritage is on the southeast section of the lake: the Hanoi Opera House, an extravagant remnant of colonial Vietnam, and the National Museum of History, which attempts to blend European and Eastern architectural styles.

TOP TIP

Hoan Kiem takes on a different personality on the weekends when traffic is banned from the roads that circle the lake. Instead, hip-hop dance troupes, toddlers driving mini-Ferraris and busking musicians take over the streets, creating a riotous, jovial atmosphere. This is one of the most enjoyable times to visit.



Turtle Tower, Hoan Kiem Lake



Hoan Kiem Lake

ATMOSPHERIC AND PHOTOGENIC LAKE

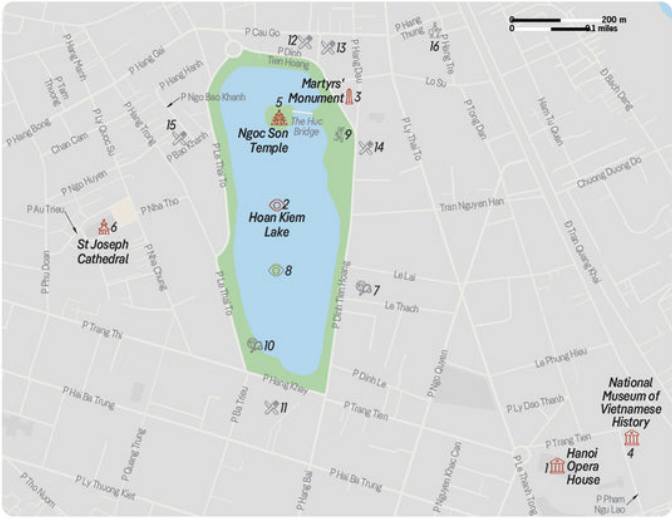
Legend claims that in the mid-15th century, heaven sent Emperor Le Loi a magical sword, which he used to drive the Chinese from Vietnam. After the war a giant golden turtle grabbed the sword and disappeared into the depths of this lake to return it to its divine owners, inspiring the name Ho Hoan Kiem (Lake of the Returned Sword). A number of ancient structures can be found around the lake, such as the pagoda-like stone gateway **Thap Hoa Phong** (Hoa Phong Tower). The ramshackle **Thap Rua** (Turtle Tower), near the southern end, is an emblem of Hanoi.



Ngoc Son Temple

ISLAND TEMPLE

Meaning 'Temple of the Jade Mountain', Hanoi's most visited temple sits on a small island in the northern part of Hoan Kiem Lake, connected to the lakeshore by an elegant scarlet bridge (called **Cau The Huc**), constructed in classical Vietnamese style and spectacularly lit in the evenings. The temple has existed for centuries and is thus dedicated to a number of legendary figures, both real and mythical, including General Tran Hung Dao (who defeated the Mongols in the 13th century), La To (patron saint of physicians) and the folkloric turtle that some believe still roams the waters.



HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Hanoi Opera House
- 2 Hoan Kiem Lake
- 3 Martyrs' Monument
- 4 National Museum of Vietnamese History
- 5 Ngoc Son Temple
- 6 St Joseph Cathedral

SIGHTS

- 7 Laughter Yoga
- 8 Thap Rua

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 9 Latin Dance
- 10 Tai Chi

EATING

- 11 Bun Dau Co Tuyen Mam Tam Hang Khay
- 12 Bun Thang Co Binh
- 13 Long Vi Dung
- 14 Pho Thin
- 15 Quan Binh Cuon Bao Khanh



Huc Bridge from the Ngoc Son Temple