



# mabuhay

MAY 2019

## EXPLORE HANOI AND ITS GORGEOUS GETAWAYS

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enjoy Auckland?  
On an electric bike

Mother's Day gift ideas  
by ceramic artists  
in the Philippines

Tired of shopping?  
Three spots in Bangkok  
for a nature break



# C O N T E N T S

MAY 2019



IMAGE: LAC HOANG

GOING

GLOBAL

58

## HANOI: ALLISTER ESGUERRA

Allister Esguerra's mom would regale her only child with tales of Vietnam while he was in university, so it was fitting that he ended up living there after graduation. Now ensconced in Hanoi, the hospitality consultant, who helps local establishments develop their products for an international market, takes time off from his busy schedule to show us his favorite spots in the capital.



GOING GLOBAL

# Hanoi

WITH ALLISTER ESGUERRA

Allister Esguerra's mom would regale her only child with tales of Vietnam while he was in university, so it was no surprise that he ended up living there after graduation. The hospitality consultant, who helps local establishments develop their products for an international market, takes time off from his busy schedule to show us his favorite spots in Hanoi

As told to **Joshua Zukas**  
Photography **Vu Bao Khanh** and **Lac Hoang**







IMAGE: AARON JOEL SANTOS (KAYAKING)



My first impressions of Vietnam were imparted by my mom, who worked here through much of the noughties. We'd catch up every weekend by phone and she'd regale me with colorful stories of Ho Chi Minh City: of whizzing motorbikes, cackling old ladies and diligent colleagues. That was 2006 – I was studying in Manila at the time and Vietnam was still an emerging economy. I couldn't quite get my head around this fantasy land that seemed so distant. "How can a poor country ravaged by war provide such a great job?" I asked. "Vietnam isn't poor," she laughed, "at least not anymore. And the war finished a long time ago!"

It was my mom's job that saw me through university. After graduating in 2010, I packed my bags and set off to see what Vietnam was all about. I landed in Ho Chi Minh City, where my mom was still working at the time. Suddenly it all came into view, like a scene coming into focus. The bikes, the people, the colors, the smells – all those stories about life in Vietnam instantly made sense.

I was hooked. I came to travel, but I stayed to work. I've since spent long stints in Hanoi working in various

capacities. It's hard to articulate what I actually do. I've spent a good deal of time moving up and down the country as a hospitality consultant, working with restaurants and hotels – helping them streamline operations, improve customer service and develop their products for an increasingly international customer base.

Here in Hanoi, I helped market the most reputable hospitality providers in the country to the rest of the world. I'm not going to lie and say that it was a cakewalk. Far from it. Hanoi is the toughest city in the country. "If you can survive Hanoi, you can survive anywhere," someone once told me. I didn't fully understand the wisdom of those words at that time, but I do now.

I hate myself for saying this, as it's so cliché – but Hanoi is a city of extremes. Everything from the weather to the people to the air quality swings wildly between two polar opposites. I've experienced intensely cold winters, and seemingly endless summers where you'd think the city was built inside an oven. I've also received extraordinary kindness from strangers, and jarring honesty from friends. Poverty sits side-by-side with wealth and yet the city remains safe –





except for the traffic, of course.

You could use an entire dictionary of adjectives to describe Hanoi but "boring" isn't one of them. The city makes an impression on everyone. Hanoi was where I fell in love for the first time; it's where I encountered my greatest challenges. It's also where I've painstakingly earned the trust of the movers and shakers of the country's creative industry. Because of Hanoi my skin is harder than ever, and for that I'm truly grateful.

Much like my hardened skin, Hanoi has many layers to it; that's a big reason why the city resonates with me. The breakneck progress and entrepreneurial zeal of Hanoi is astonishing, considering that Vietnam was a controlled economy around three decades ago.

On the other hand, the city disdains the bulldozing of culture or heritage just for the sake of development. Living in a city surrounded by the contrast of old and new worlds creates memories that are unforgettable.

I remember first moving to Hanoi and living in a modern apartment building. My landlady had built it behind her street-facing house, which doubled as a café that was extremely spartan. My







## CITY GUIDE

### Saturday

**Hoan Kiem Lake**  
Hoan Kiem District

**Cong Caphe**  
54 Ma May Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[congcaphes.com](http://congcaphes.com)

**Hanoia House**  
38 Hang Dao Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[hanoia.com](http://hanoia.com)

**Tired City**  
3 Hang Bong Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[tiredcity.com](http://tiredcity.com)

**Ngon Villa**  
10 Tong Duy Tan Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[ngonvilla.com](http://ngonvilla.com)

**National Library of Vietnam**  
31 Trang Thi Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[nlv.gov.vn/ef](http://nlv.gov.vn/ef)

**Maison Marou Hanoi**  
91A Tho Nhuon Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[marouchocolate.com](http://marouchocolate.com)

**Vietnamese Women's Museum**  
36 Ly Thuong Kiet Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[baotangphunu.org.vn](http://baotangphunu.org.vn)

**Pizza 4P's**  
43 Trang Tien Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[pizza4ps.com](http://pizza4ps.com)

**Ne Cocktailbar**  
3B Tong Duy Tan Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[fb.com/necocktailbar](http://fb.com/necocktailbar)  
-174456829728862



apartment had all the modern amenities I could possibly want, and yet the café didn't even have a cash register! My landlady was very wealthy but was permanently in pajamas.

This encounter reflects some of the contrasting layers that I'd associate with Hanoi: basic but lavish; trustworthy yet business savvy; conservative but still open-minded. Hanoi has won my heart and my respect, and it's a city that I'll never stop coming back to – for better or for worse.

## SATURDAY

### 6AM

Dawn is the best time to discover **Hoan Kiem Lake**, the city's geographical and spiritual heart. It's also a popular venue for outdoor exercises – I do a languid loop of this small lake, while looking out for yoga enthusiasts, young hip-hop dancers and old ladies practicing tai chi. Being around all this activity gives me the energy I need for the weekend ahead.

### 7AM

I head to ❶ ❷ **Cong Caphe** for one of their signature coconut coffees, a heavenly blend of Vietnamese coffee, creamy coconut milk and sweet condensed milk. It serves as a pick-me-up and fill-me-up as I'm skipping breakfast this morning. This hip, Communist-themed café draws on Hanoi's history during the 1970s post-war subsidy phase for inspiration, and is popular among Vietnamese millennials.

### 9AM

After getting a much-needed dose of caffeine, I'm able to tackle the busy Old Quarter. This popular tourist spot features a tight network of family-run stores that has been a part of Hanoi's shopping hub for years, and is still going strong in the face of Vietnam's rapid commercialization. Forget malls – this is where the shopping is at. Among the mix is Hanoi's new wave of design-focused boutiques. Whenever I need inspiration for a new fun project I head to ❸ **Hanoia House**, which specializes in high-quality lacquerware. It has daring jewelry that combines bold primary colors with cutting-edge design. I then move on to ❹ **Tired City**, a retail platform for local artists and designers. The clothes are progressive and original, and the designs sometimes poke fun at Vietnamese society and culture in a jovial way. I can't resist



snagging a graphic t-shirt depicting a policeman performing a flip trick on a skateboard.

#### 11:30AM

I'm hungry from all that shopping, so I head to **Ngon Villa**, a French villa-turned-foodie haven. They specialize in an all-you-can-eat concept, but this isn't your usual buffet. You pay one price and order anything you like from the menu. The portions are small, so you can order a variety of dishes before filling up. They have classic Vietnamese street food like *bun cha* (grilled meat patties with vermicelli noodles) and spring rolls, as well as delectable restaurant dishes like *ngao hap sa ot* (steamed clams with lemongrass and chili) and shrimp with tamarind sauce.

#### 1:30PM

Ngon Villa is located between the Old Quarter and the French Quarter. I swap winding streets and alleyways for broad, tree-lined boulevards, and delve into a historic grid system built by the French. There's gorgeous French architecture everywhere I look, like the **National Library of Vietnam**, the Supreme People's Court of Vietnam and the Embassy of India.

#### 2:30PM

⑤ ⑥ **Maison Marou Hanoi** sits behind the Embassy of India. It seems fitting that Hanoi's best French chocolate makers is nestled among the city's most stunning colonial mansions. I'm feeling indulgent so I order their signature hot chocolate and a chocolate brownie, and grab a table at the back so I can watch the chocolatiers work their magic behind the broad glass paneling.

#### 3:30PM

Both the Philippines and Vietnam are known for fostering powerful women, and the ⑦ **Vietnamese Women's Museum** is a place where I can take pride in this shared value. It's just around the corner from Maison Marou Hanoi. I'm eager to see the temporary exhibitions, which are women-focused, and I always visit the section highlighting the role of Vietnamese



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (MAI CHAU), ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (CAT BA & SAPA)





7

## BEYOND HANOI

Four reasons to extend your vacation



### Ninh Binh

Two hours from Hanoi

Venture south and uncover Ninh Binh, Vietnam's "Halong Bay on land". Winding rivers meander through towering karst formations, setting the scene for relaxing and atmospheric boat trips captained by locals that row with their feet. The Trang An and Tam Coc river routes pass through water caves to reveal secluded temples and pagodas that have been carved into the mountainside. Take a bicycle and crisscross vibrant green rice terraces or climb the 500-step Hang Mua for picture-perfect views of the countryside. Be sure to stop by Bai Dinh Pagoda, one of the largest religious complexes in Southeast Asia.



### Mai Chau

Three-and-a-half hours from Hanoi

Journey west and climb the rolling hills to reach the valley community of Mai Chau, a charming collection of ethnic White Thai villages. With simple but comfortable family homestays offering mouthwatering homemade cuisine, this is one of the best places in the country to learn more about village life. In addition to their striking stilt houses and warm hospitality, the White Thai are also famous for their weaving and dancing – you'll find nightly dance performances as well as traditional looms in the villages. From unique handmade scarfs to colorful pillow cases, Mai Chau makes for excellent fabric shopping.



### Cat Ba

Four hours from Hanoi

Head east toward the coast, cross Vietnam's longest bridge and hop on a ferry to arrive at Cat Ba Island, an outdoor adventure hub. Cat Ba National Park dominates a large portion of the island – and you can camp under the stars within this forest of towering trees and endangered primates. If you're feeling energetic, you can arrange rewarding hikes, from leisurely two-hour strolls to challenging two-day adventures. You can also take a motorbike and tackle the scenic roads that skirt around the island outside the national park.



### Sapa

Five hours from Hanoi

Drive to the north of Hanoi and check out the country's tallest mountains. The mountain town of Sapa has much to offer, including a refreshing alpine climate and spectacular vistas. Surrounding the town is a network of roads and trails explorable by foot, bicycle or motorbike – but if all that sounds a little too intense, you can conquer Vietnam's tallest peak by cable car instead. This is one of the country's most ethnically diverse regions – you'll find Hmong, Red Dao and Tay villages in close proximity to one another, each with their own unique language, architecture and culture.



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**Hanoi is a city of extremes. Everything from the weather to the people and the air quality swings wildly between two polar opposites**

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women during the wars. I'm captivated and humbled by the strength and dedication of Vietnamese women – exemplified by the heroic deeds of these war veterans and the unfaltering courage of mothers protecting their children during the Hanoi bombings.

#### 5:30PM

Learning about feminism in Vietnam is inspiring – and it's given me a roaring appetite. After a solid hour spent in the museum I stroll north to Japanese-owned Italian-inspired pizzeria, **8 9 Pizza 4P's**. I'm always impressed by the enormous selection of cheeses available, made by the restaurant's own dairy farm in the Central Highlands. Pizza is a dish best shared, so I meet some friends and order the chicken teriyaki pizza, house-made cheese pizza and a bottle of Chilean sauvignon blanc.

#### 8PM

The night's still young, so my friends and I skirt around Hoan Kiem Lake and head for **10 Ne Cocktailbar**, a stylish cocktail bar co-owned by award-winning mixologist Pham Tien Tiep. They specialize in cocktails that use local ingredients, such as green sticky rice, which is delicious. There's space at the bar so we perch there. I tell one of the mixologists what I like, and he rewards me with a bespoke cocktail.



8



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## CITY GUIDE Sunday

**Le Club Bar**  
Sofitel Legend  
Metropole Hanoi  
15 Ngo Quyen Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[sofitel-legend-metropole-hanoi.com](http://sofitel-legend-metropole-hanoi.com)

**Green Palm Gallery**  
15 Trang Tien Street  
Hoan Kiem District  
[greenpalmgallery.com](http://greenpalmgallery.com)

**Long Bien Bridge**  
Cau Long Bien Street  
Long Bien District

**77 Truc Bach**  
77 Truc Bach Street  
Ba Dinh District

**Mad Society**  
2 Tay Ho Street  
Tay Ho District  
[fb.com/madsocietyhanoi](http://fb.com/madsocietyhanoi)

**Crystal Jade Palace**  
JW Marriott Hotel Hanoi  
8 Do Duc Duc Street  
Nam Tu Liem District  
[jwmarriothanoilife.com](http://jwmarriothanoilife.com)

### SUNDAY 10AM

Yesterday's early rise has earned me a lazier start this morning, so I begin with a leisurely brunch at **Le Club Bar** – the perfect remedy for a light hangover from last night's indulgence. Tucked away within the historic Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi, the space evokes the romanticism of French Hanoi with colonial-era ceiling fans and patterned windows overlooking the leafy grounds. I take this opportunity to refamiliarize myself with this slice of Hanoi's history by exploring the hotel before grabbing something to eat. The décor is European, but that doesn't stop me from ordering Vietnamese. I go for *bun bo nam bo* (stir-fried beef with vermicelli noodles and salad) with a side of spring rolls. To top it all off, I order Vietnamese coffee with ice and condensed milk.

### 12PM

I could spend all day at the cafés and boutiques in this gorgeous hotel, but instead I cross the street and dive into **Green Palm Gallery** to see what's new. This gallery, which doubles as a personal sanctuary, showcases Vietnam's established contemporary artists, from



the bold lacquer works of Nguyen Thanh Chuong to the quiet beauty seen in the oil paintings of Hong Viet Dung. I check out the works of one of my favorite artists, Nguyen Trong Minh, who embraces simplicity with subdued colors and astute repetition.

### 2PM

It's time for some fresh air. I jump into a taxi and head north, leaving central Hanoi behind. I stop at **Long Bien Bridge**, which endured the American bombings during the war in the 1970s. It's always a great spot for photos, no matter the weather.





14

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**The breakneck  
 progress and  
 entrepreneurial zeal of  
 Hanoi is astonishing,  
 considering that  
 Vietnam used to be a  
 controlled economy**  
 ”

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**3PM**

I feel like having a snack, so I continue north to the quiet streets of charming Truc Bach, one of my preferred neighborhoods to while away a Sunday afternoon. This is also where you should sample one of Hanoi's specialty dishes: *pho cuon* (fresh spring rolls with herbs and stir-fried beef). A lot of people recommend the bustling Ngu Xa Street for this dish, but I prefer the string of restaurants on Truc Bach Street, which runs right next to the lake. I grab a seat at the rather unimaginatively named eatery <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> **77 Truc Bach** – no prizes for guessing the address. Afterwards, I amble around the neighborhood and maybe do a loop of Truc Bach Lake. If it's a clear day, I'll watch the sunset over the water.



15

**6PM**

For pre-dinner drinks, I move to West Lake, Hanoi's leafy expat enclave. In addition to being well-known for its collection of trendy bars, West Lake is also the spot for top international cuisine, like mouthwatering Argentinian steak and spicy Indian curries. I'm saving dinner for later, so I meet friends at <sup>16</sup> **Mad Society**, a stylish Korean-owned bar and restaurant. I love this place because it feels like I'm stepping into another universe. It has impressive interiors – especially the library of spirits displayed behind the bar – but it's the funky jazz and electronic playlist that really crafts the atmosphere. Despite the temptation of having a cocktail, my friends and I order rosé.



16





## CITY GUIDE Monday

**Halong Bay**  
Paradise Cruise  
2/F Hanoi Towers, 49  
Hai Ba Tung Street,  
Hoan Kiem District  
[paradisecruise.com](http://paradisecruise.com)

“  
Living in a city  
surrounded by the  
contrast of old and  
new worlds creates  
memories that are  
unforgettable  
”

### 8:30PM

Later, my friends and I cross town to **Crystal Jade Palace**. This is the best Chinese joint in the city, serving an elevated take on my favorite Cantonese dishes. I start by ordering dumplings, and then fried rice or fried noodles. This is real comfort food but it's far from basic. All the seafood is super fresh and it's seasoned to perfection. The meal doesn't just round off the weekend, it also sets me up for the week ahead.

### MONDAY

#### 7AM

Now that I've got my city fix, I head out for a day tour to 📍 **Halong Bay**. Just two hours from Hanoi, it's a labyrinth of jungle-topped islets, secluded rock pools and cavernous caves. This vast natural wonder – twice recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site – is best explored by cruise ships that offer fun-filled escapades. My friends at Paradise Cruise, a long-established luxury cruise company, set me up for a fun time. With their help I uncover the treasures of the bay by exploring the islands and its associated legends. I could climb hills offering panoramic views of the landscape, but I choose to take a kayak and roam on my own – a definitive highlight of any Halong Bay experience.

IMAGE: AARON JOEL SANTOS



17



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