

# Past and future collide in Vietnam



**BLADERUNNER WITH BIKES:** Scooters zip around Saigon, also known as Ho Chi Min City

**KATH KAY** visits Hanoi and Saigon – and discovers a potent mix of Bladerunner, traditions and sublime beauty

**CROSSING** the road in Saigon tests the nerves.

Forget waiting for a clear run; just start walking fast and hope the tide of scooters swerves around you.

For Saigon, also known as Ho Chi Min City, is Bladerunner with bikes, a neon labyrinth; a brash, modern metropolis.

But linking those busy streets are shoulder-wide alleyways, concealing scenes from an older world where string-vested men suck on cigarettes and women in conical hats stir steaming pans of noodles.

Echoes of this unchanged way of life are found throughout rural Vietnam. It is a country of sublime beauty, where an intoxicating kaleidoscope of colours ranges from misty grey mountains in the north to brilliant green rice paddies in the south, while unspoiled creamy beaches stroke its curvaceous coastline.

On a cruise into the Mekong Delta, we forewent the touristy floating markets of My Tho City to explore the backwaters of Long An province. Brick huts and houses on stilts choked the riverbanks, then gave way to mangrove palms. Floating polystyrene rubbish was usurped by water hyacinths. We stopped at a local market where the food was so fresh it had a heartbeat. Fish flapped in buckets and two-day old chicks waddled around in pens.

Upriver in the opposite direction are the Cu Chi Tunnels where, during the war against America, about 16,000 people sheltered from US bombs in this underground network.

Americans were the last in a long line of invaders who failed to conquer this proud nation, and the Vietnamese side of the story is told at sites across the country. Saigon's War Remnants Museum, for example, houses a collection of evocative photos illustrating the effects of napalm and phosphorous bombs dropped on to the country in the 1960s and 70s.

From Saigon we headed north to the popular resort town of Nha Trang. A short speedboat ride away on the Hon Heo peninsula is the newly opened An Lam Ninh Bay, the perfect antidote to the pace of the city – the yin to Saigon's yang.

Luxury villas are surrounded by forested hills and come complete with private plunge pools and sliding glass doors with sea views. Quirky touches include cushioned swings in the rooms and a solitary deck with two sun-beds floating off-shore.

Mealtimes showcased Nha Trang's famous seafood with great aplomb, from panfried prawns and succulent scallops, to garlic lobster served with organic vegetables from the chef's garden. I also developed a guilty addiction to the delicious homebaked breads and pastries.

The next major stop on Vietnam's central coast is Hoi An, one of two UNESCO World Heritage sites in this region. Once a key trading port, Hoi An is now a living museum whose exhibits include lantern-lit streets and wonderfully preserved buildings.

Among its art galleries, antique stores and tailors are many artisan workshops. We saw baby silkworms no bigger than my fingernail waiting to



**CHANGE OF PACE:** An Lam Ninh Bay

produce some of the finest silk in southeast Asia.

The steady stream of visitors passing through Hoi An has turned it into a gourmet's delight. We loved the fusion of Vietnamese and Latin flavours at Mango Rooms, whose premium river views and funky interiors provide the perfect backdrop to its seriously good food.

We even tried our hand at making some local classics at the Red Bridge Restaurant and Cooking School. The lighthearted but instructive approach resulted in some very edible crispy pancakes and a delicious aubergine hot pot.

Worthy of the short trip out of town is The Nam Hai, by far the best hotel in Hoi An. Marrying traditional Vietnamese design with cutting-edge facilities, there's everything you'd expect of a five-star resort. We split our time between its three infinity pools and the spa, which is set around a lotus-filled lagoon close to the beach.

Further north, the historical city of Hue is the country's geographic and spiritual heart. After exploring the UNESCO-protected ruins of the Imperial City, we chartered a boat to visit the tombs, pagodas and temples along the Perfume River.

Also located on its banks is the former French governor's residence, now transformed into La Residence, an elegant Art Deco hotel. We joined the long list of Hollywood actors, queens, and heads of state to grace its stylish suites.

At the top of Vietnam, its captivating capital Hanoi embodies the paradox of this fast-developing nation. Here, the exoticism of old Asia meets dynamic commercialisation. A unique blend of grace and pace, it's an ancient city functioning at high speed.

Hanoi is the best place to arrange a trip to the UNESCO-listed Halong Bay, an incredible archipelago of limestone karsts that rise from the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin.

We saw it from the comfort of a cabin on the



**NATURAL WONDER:** UNESCO-listed Halong Bay, an incredible archipelago of limestone karsts

Halong Ginger, a red-sailed wooden junk built in the traditional Vietnamese style. After morning tai chi we lounged in the afternoon sun, then sipped cocktails at dusk while sailing silently through the maze of narrow channels.

On our return to Hanoi, we found the best way to experience the city's constant bustle is by cyclo – a modified bicycle with a driver perched behind a wide passenger seat. It's an exhilarating experience to cut through streams of traffic at pedal pace, surrounded by honking horns.

In the Old Quarter, a maze of narrow roads date back to the 13th century when specialised trade guilds were responsible for each street. Today it's a modernised version of the ancient chaos and there's still a lane for pretty much everything – from kites to cotton reels, and bird cages to Buddhas.

A tour of the city's highlights included the Van Mieu Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first university and a 1,000 year-old national treasure. We visited at the start of exam season, and students waited patiently to pray for good luck.

Queues also snaked around the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, where the revered leader lies in state. Another taste of history was on display at the Hoa Lo prison, ironically named the 'Hanoi Hilton' by imprisoned American pilots shot down by Vietnamese fighters. Once the most feared prison in the region, it's an eerie place containing original cells, guillotines and escape tunnels.

At dusk we strolled around Hoan Kiem Lake, the city's literal and figurative heart and to where locals and visitors gravitate to exercise and socialise. We pulled up low plastic stools, ordered a Vietnamese desert of fruit with milk and crushed ice, and watched the organised chaos unfold around us.

## TRAVEL facts

Vietnam Airlines ([www.vietnamairlines.com.vn](http://www.vietnamairlines.com.vn)) is launching direct services between the UK and Vietnam on 9 December 2011. The airline will offer flights from London Gatwick to Hanoi and Saigon, from £650 (inc tax).

Deluxe rooms at New World Hotel ([www.saigon.newworldhotels.com](http://www.saigon.newworldhotels.com)) in Saigon start from US\$159 (around £100).

Villas at An Lam Ninh Van Bay ([www.epikurean.ws](http://www.epikurean.ws)) start from US\$500 (around £317), including breakfast and transfers. The Nam Hai ([www.thenamhai.com](http://www.thenamhai.com)) has villas from \$540 (around £343), including breakfast and airport transfers. Rooms at La Residence Hotel & Spa ([www.la-residence-hue.com](http://www.la-residence-hue.com)) start from US\$161 (around £104) including breakfast. A room at the Hilton Hanoi Opera ([hanoi.hilton.com](http://hanoi.hilton.com)) costs from US\$131 (around £83) on B&B basis.\*

Cookery classes at The Red Bridge Restaurant and Cooking School in Hoi An ([www.visithoian.com/redbridge/restaurant](http://www.visithoian.com/redbridge/restaurant)) start at \$27pp (around £17) including lunch. For details about Mango Rooms visit [www.mangorooms.com](http://www.mangorooms.com). For trips along the Mekong Delta and beyond visit [www.saigonriverexpress.com](http://www.saigonriverexpress.com). For tours around Hanoi visit [www.hatravel.com.vn](http://www.hatravel.com.vn) and for Halong Bay Cruises visit [www.cruisehalong.com](http://www.cruisehalong.com)

■ All prices are per night and may be subject to taxes.