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A Trip to Vietnam Is a Recipe for Adventure: One Part Cooking Sessions, One Part History Lessons

By JEMIMA SISSONS

Under a balmy sky in bustling Ho Chi Minh City, women in traditional *non la* hats are watering immaculately tended parks, while buses and bikes with incomprehensible loads—from baths and live pigs to families of five—compete for pavement along leafy avenues lined with grand colonial buildings.

In the center of town on the frenetic Pasteur Street, the smell of piquant spices and warm broth permeates the air, and an eager crowd is milling under a gold sign. Pho Hoa is arguably the best *pho* shop in town, and the bustling business churns out 400 bowls of the piping-hot soup a day. Herbs I have never encountered before, like sawgrass, are piled high onto a plate in the middle of our table and we are encouraged to fill our bowls as the owner explains that it is the mixture of beef bones, aloe vera and ginger that gives *pho* its distinct taste. The rich broth is balanced perfectly by the sharpness of the chili and fresh lime, and a restorative fragrance is added by the herbs. It is by far the best *pho* I've ever had.

This is the first stop on my culinary tour of Vietnam. From imperial Hue cuisine in the north to simple street food, the eight-day trip takes me through the gastronomic peaks and valleys of this country's diverse cuisine. Organized by London-based travel company Brown & Hudson, part of a new wave of upmarket companies offering bespoke culinary tours, it is an informative mixture of food exploration and history lesson. These tailor-made trips by firms like such as Tasting Places and Creative Escapes of the U.K. and U.S.-based Remote Lands give visitors an insider's perspective of the countries they are touring, with local experts guiding them through unique experiences, in-the-know restaurants and places not normally open to the public, such as private vineyards and kitchens. While the hotels are top-notch and transportation is comfortable, these holidays are for those seeking something more—the acquisition of knowledge and new skills.

As we tour Ho Chi Minh City's Ben Thanh fruit and vegetable market with Brown & Hudson founding partner Philippe Brown and a tour guide, we feast our eyes on dazzling displays of dragon fruit, rambutans and custard apples, along with plates of flapping fish, some errantly careering off metal plates into our pathway. Afterward, we eat at one of the city's best restaurants, the colonial Temple Club, where I am served an array of delicacies such as *cha ca*, a fried monkfish, and green bean Hue cake. As I sip the house speciality—the Japanese Slipper, consisting of Midori, Cointreau and lemon juice—in the mosaic and exposed-brick room, I feel transported to another age.

The next day, we move to Da Nang in central Vietnam. Home is the Nam Hai resort, built on a long sandy beach near the ruins of one of the largest American air bases during the Vietnam War—it is still possible to see remains of the bunkers. A short, half-day excursion takes us to the awe-inspiring caves of Marble Mountain, which once gave refuge to the Vietcong. Religious icons sit in niches in the vast, cool, temple-like interior; fat white buddhas keep guard outside. That afternoon, we tour the local market in the Unesco-listed town of Hoi An. Our guide



Clockwise from top, preparations are laid out for the grilled chicken and banana-flower salad at the Red Bridge Cooking School in Hoi An; Nam Hai head chef Conrado Tromp in the hotels carefully tended organic vegetable garden; author Jemima Sissons prepares an imperial feast at Red Bridge Cooking School.

points out huge knobs of turmeric and ginger as we pick up herbs—edible chrysanthemum, sawgrass, spearmint—and good-natured market sellers look on as we sample everything in sight. The fish vendors are packing up for the day—some snoozing on wooden tables, with vats of pungent fish sauce brewing on shelves nearby. As well as fruit and vegetables, the market offers brightly colored lacquered tableware, woven mats and good luck charms made out of tree roots, meant to ward off evil.

Later, I try my hand at preparing some of the produce we tasted with a cooking class at the Red Bridge Cooking School. Surrounded by lotus flowers, dragon flies darting in and out of our pagoda and the sound of the Hoi An River gently rolling by, I am introduced to some Vietnamese basics by Phi Nguyen, a top-level chef who previously cooked in the Nam Hai kitchens. I learn how to make a zingy grilled chicken and banana-flower salad with a delicious ginger, soy chilli, lime and fish-sauce dressing. Enticing smells of grilled beef waft through the air as we start to prepare a *pho* from scratch. We make noodles by spreading rice paste on to a piece of mesh that sits over a pot of boiling water. After steaming the dough for several minutes, we peel it off and cut it into long strips

before adding it to the *pho* broth. While I won't likely make my own noodles at home—it's too time-consuming—what I do take away is the ability to create a perfect summer salad and a mean *pho*, as well as some helpful tips: If you get chilli in your eye, and can bear it, rub your eye with strands of hair; if you burn yourself, sea salt is the best cure.

My cooking adventures continue back at the Nam Hai, where I embark on a tour of the hotel's 1.2-hectare kitchen garden with head chef Conrado Tromp. We walk past immaculate rows of mustard lettuce, red basil and other non-native herbs that have been brought over to Vietnam by the Dutch chef. We put them to good use in the kitchen with a cooking lesson that includes *my quang* (fresh rice noodles with prawn and chicken) and *banh xeo* (sizzling coconut crepes). Although I am able to master the *my quang* and love using the vast woks, with their satisfying sizzle, the crepes are less than perfect and my least successful dish yet.

After two days, we head north to the former imperial region of Hue. Here, the cuisine contrasts with the simple, hearty food we have experienced so far. Originated as fancy fare for the emperor, it is elaborate and a marvel to look at, with chefs often using natural ingredients to color rice five different shades, cre-

ating a kaleidoscope on the plate. We are brought an array of intricate dishes, all designed around salt—a sign of wealth in this region—and its different flavors: pineapple is eaten with chili salt; steamed cassava is paired with a sesame salt. The day ends with yet another cooking lesson, this time in the grand home of a local dignitary, where I learn how to make imperial dumplings—or attempt to make, as these delicate morsels require a deftness of hand I don't possess.

The final leg of our journey takes us to Hanoi, home of French fusion cooking, where we sample some of Vietnam's finest street food. Didier Corlou, who runs two restaurants here—the traditional Madame Hien and the fusion La Verticale—takes us on an adventure through Hanoi that begins on the back of a cyclo, or rickshaw. Having lived here for 20 years, French-born Mr. Corlou knows the city's labyrinthine streets like the back of his hand, and we dodge through markets, where we sit on tiny plastic stools feasting on crepes and chopped salads, and meander down narrow alleyways to coffee shops hidden behind unassuming shop facades.

We end at the place where cuisine starts for many of the country's chefs—the Koto project, which helps transform the lives of street chil-

dren by teaching them culinary skills. Started in 2000 by Australian Jimmy Pham, the nonprofit organization offers 24-month courses after which students graduate as professional chefs or front-of-house managers (chefs at both the Red River School and Nam Hai are graduates of the program). Students learn English as well as life skills, and are encouraged to take jobs around the world. When I visit, five graduates are about to go to Dubai to work in Mövenpick hotels.

As I leave this place, my head is filled with incredible tastes and smells, and I feel like I have learned a great deal about its diverse cuisine, while seeing a vast swath of Vietnam and delving into its history. I have discovered the importance of taking time and care when preparing dishes from scratch, and how to balance the delicate flavors used in Vietnamese cuisine. My chopping skills are vastly improved and I will go out of my way in London to seek out some of the interesting herbs, fruits and vegetables I enjoyed here.

Like others who have explored farflung regions before me, I am bringing back with me souvenirs (though whether I'll find use for my morning glory slicer in London remains to be seen), an expanded view of the gastronomic world and a taste for a spicier life.