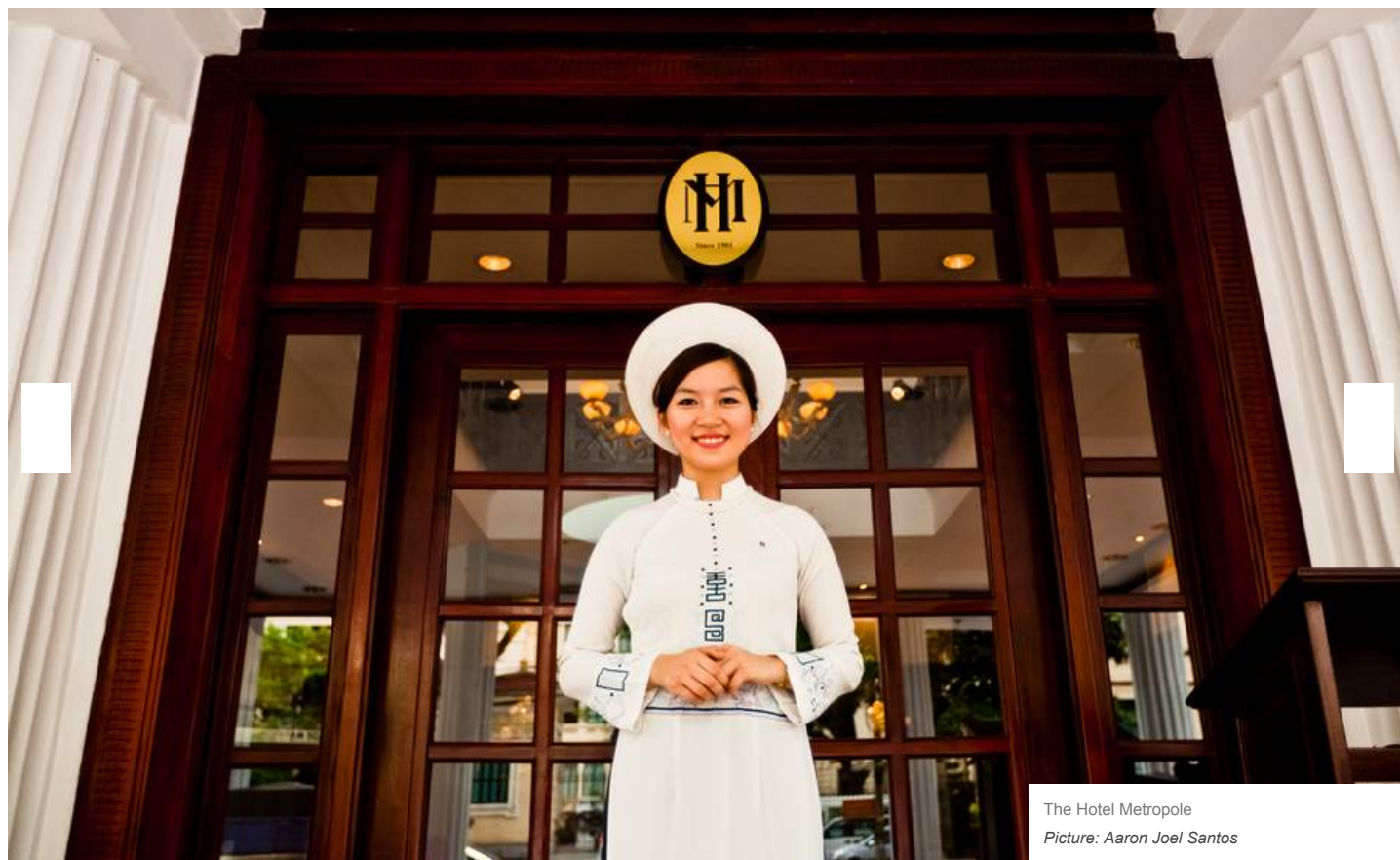


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The Hotel Metropole

Picture: Aaron Joel Santos

TRAVEL

Vietnam: Asia's newest luxury hotspot

Its rich indigenous culture and glorious landscapes now complemented by gourmet restaurants and boutique hotels, Vietnam has never looked better

BY E JANE DICKSON

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Steam rising from vast kettles of *pho*, the fragrant noodle broth that fuels Vietnam, gives a wavy, hallucinatory edge to street life in Hanoi. Pavement cafés are no-frills affairs – a scatter of plastic stools no higher than an upturned bucket. Crouched, knees to chin, I am doing my best to convey noodles, slippery as elvers, from bowl to mouth with chopsticks.

“What age are you?” asks the café proprietor, a grandmother who stirs soup, semaphores to customers and ushers children out of the way in one graceful movement. Clearly, she thinks she has a giant baby on her hands and kindly takes time to demonstrate the rapid stir-and-schloop technique required for safe ingestion of *pho*.

The scene swirling about me in the Vietnamese capital is so various, so densely

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The Red Bridge Restaurant and Cookery School in Hoi An

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packed with incident, that it seems the life of five cities has been squeezed into a single, jaw-dropping spectacle. Scooters, impossibly laden with great cantilevered piles of produce, choke the narrow streets in a solid, honking stream. A farmer sputters past on his way to market with a pig carcass riding pillion. A coffin wobbles on the back of a trishaw. There's a hawkler staggering under the weight of a shoulder pole hung with votives for ancestor worship. And then, as if choreographed by Rodgers and Hammerstein, a blur of moving foamy pink blossom forms into a phalanx of schoolchildren bearing peach trees to celebrate the lunar new year.

Although it's just 50 years since "the American War" brought Vietnam to its knees, its recovery has been spectacular. The

liberalising effects of *doi moi*, the economic reforms implemented in 1986 to create a "socialist-oriented market economy", are everywhere apparent. And while it is a funny kind of socialism – there is, for example, no free education – free-market competition is joyously embraced. (A shop front advertising "High Class Laundry" is trumped by its neighbour: "High, High Class Laundry".)

I'm privileged to spend a morning at the granite acropolis where the communist revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh has lain in state since his death in 1969 with Dr Nguyen Huu Ngoc, a distinguished historian who fought French colonialists and American aggressors alongside "Uncle Ho" and later

became his official translator. "Ho Chi Minh," Dr Nguyen tells me, "was essentially a nationalist, a man of the people. But he didn't believe in class struggle. And he would have hated that mausoleum."

What Uncle Ho – whose army marched on flip flops made from motor tyres – would make of the queues outside the Hanoi branches of Gucci and Christian Louboutin is anybody's guess. Vietnam has effectively transformed from a centuries-old agrarian economy to a service-based economy in the space of a generation. This rapid social and economic change – per capita GDP has doubled in four years – has created an elite hungry for luxury. Owners of Bentleys and BMWs are proud to sit calmly behind their wheels in the sea of scooters. Bridal parties, shiny with hope and hand-sewn sequins,

arrange themselves for wedding pictures on the marble steps of western-style shopping malls. And, significantly, the new spirit of openness has sparked a radical overhaul of tourism; the lifting of "movement regulations" in 1997 allowed visitors to travel freely within the country and, more recently, the ministry for tourism has concentrated investment in the "lavish sector".

Once the preserve of gap-year backpackers and specialist trips for US Army "vets", Vietnam now boasts five-star hotels and resorts to rival the most luxurious destinations in Thailand or Malaysia. Infrastructure in less visited parts of the country is still rudimentary, but a growing number of bespoke travel services have opened up Vietnam's 1,900 miles of coastline, unspoiled tropical jungle and ancient heritage to a new wave of upmarket travellers.



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Fine food at Le Beaulieu restaurant in Hanoi

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Crab in chantilly cream at Hanoi's La Verticale

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China Beach in Danang, capital of the South Central region, was once the preserve of US troops on R&R. Now it's planted with parasols and boasts a Colin Montgomerie golf course, a Michel Roux restaurant (La Maison 1888 at the Intercontinental), and flop-and-relax resorts. Spas offer guests "VIP suites" and caviar facials. Along the streets, hawkers sell handbags with faux European luxury labels and price tags that are a fraction of the real things.

Not all of the coastline, thankfully, is as international as Danang. Just 40 minutes' drive away, in Quang Nam Province, is a world in which water buffalo pull geometrical plough-lines through lime green paddies, and where life goes on as it did 100 years ago. Here, at the celebrated Red Bridge Restaurant, on an inlet of the Thu Bon River, I join a Vietnamese cookery class. It's something of an eye opener to see the skill and dexterity that goes into fashioning the humble spring roll. Our tutor, Thanh, cuts no corners – we are required to make our own rice paper, steaming thin layers of batter on stretched muslin – but he cheerfully accepts the limitations of his fumbling students. "One Vietnamese minute," he says, tapping his watch, "that would be about two hours in European time."

Rising, dreamlike, from the waterlands, the former trading port of Hoi An was effectively marooned in the 19th century by the silting of the Thu Bon River. Now a Unesco World Heritage Site, the town is a perfectly preserved architectural cache of pagodas, temples and merchant dwellings strung along the estuary. Immaculate shop fronts and pedestrianised streets seem almost Disneyfied after the chaos of Hanoi; an extravagantly moustached shopkeeper shrugs charmingly when I find him sprinkling the dust of ages on "antique" ceramics. Only yards from the main drag, however, life goes on as it has for centuries. In the 17th-century Fujian Assembly Hall, a shy couple prays before the goddess of fertility and her 12 midwives. Traditional meeting houses are filled with the distinctive click and swipe of mah-jong tiles.

Hoi An is famed for its express tailoring and punters are sized up, literally, at a glance. Before I can say, "Let me think about it", I'm pinned and pleated into shimmering silk. The workmanship is superb and the finished garment can be collected the same day, although it might be a good idea to bring along a favourite piece as a template; local style works a flouncy, Eighties vibe.

The South Central Coast's most secluded and exclusive beach strip is Lang Co, a six-mile curve of pink-gold sand at the base of the Truong Son mountains. For anyone harbouring a From Here to Eternity fantasy of rolling surf and misty peaks, this is the place to indulge it. In the neighbouring village of Cu Du, a fisherman sculls me across a smooth, jade lagoon in a wicker coracle to inspect the venerable mangrove that is said to ensnare souls in its woody tentacles.

By mid-afternoon clouds are boiling up the valley like steam from a giant wok; I'm driven up the aptly named Sea Cloud mountain, slamming around hairpin bends to Hai Van, Vietnam's highest pass. An immense, faded billboard showing proletarian heroics and crumbling, bullet-pocked pill boxes are reminders that this was the official frontier between communist North Vietnam and the American-controlled South. At the summit, Vietnamese visitors take me for an American. Ho Chi Minh, they tell me, always said that ordinary US citizens were opposed to the "American war". They seem to believe it.

If the political border between North and South Vietnam has been effaced, cultural differences remain distinct. Travelling south, the food is hotter, the mindset more laid-back. And the weather is incomparably better.

Ninh Thuan Province, the region with the least rainfall and most sunny days

in Vietnam, is also the least developed, but the broad corniche along its spectacular, rugged shoreline suggests it's gearing up to be the Vietnamese Riviera. For the moment its wildness is part of the attraction – jaguars can still be spotted in Nui Chua National Park and green sea turtles appear almost luminous in the clear waters of the adjoining marine reserve. At Po Klong Garai, a pilgrimage site for the Cham people, the salt breeze has softened the edges of fantastical sandstone towers. A few miles down the road, I stop at a Buddhist pagoda under construction, where prefabricated concrete dragons have flashing electric eyes. Workmen, untroubled by health and safety, allow me to climb to the top of the unfinished building where I share Buddha's view of the countryside, a patchwork of paddies, salt pans and shining carpets of dried shrimp (the main ingredient for the region's famous fish sauce).

In contrast to this hard-hacked region, the Mekong Delta is a kind of tropical Eden, an allegorical illustration of fecundity. Swapping the river boat for a bike, I explore a lacework of tributaries bordered by orchards where unfeasibly large jackfruit hang across my path.

Ho Chi Minh City (old Saigon) is the exclamation mark at the end of my odyssey, a sky-scraping city crackling with entrepreneurial energy. There are eight million people and four million motorbikes; all of which, it seems, turn out for the nightly “fast living”, a kind of petrolhead passeggiata, where the young and the restless zoom round the boulevards, just because they can. Crossing the road feels like a senseless act of bravado (the trick is to walk out and trust they'll drive round you; dither and you're dead). Far more fun to tour the city on the back of a Vespa.

With a thrilling rev and a small yelp, I join the strobing slipstream of red tail lights. Vietnam right now is having the ride of its life. It'd be a shame to miss the action.

A nine-day all-inclusive journey with Brown & Hudson (0203 358 0110; brownandhudson.com) exploring the length of Vietnam, staying in luxury hotels, costs from £15,300 per person, including business-class flights, transfers, activities and specialist guides in each destination.

For more advice on where to stay, eat, shop and visit in Vietnam, see our [luxury travel guide to the best of Vietnam](#)

This article appears in the autumn issue of [Ultratravel](#), the Telegraph's luxury-travel magazine, out on Saturday, September 13.

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