

Hanoi to Halong Bay

Panita Sarawasee, a researcher at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok, recently travelled to Vietnam to experience the world of the minorities in the Indochinese country. She stopped by in Hanoi to spend some time there, and shares her impressions of the city, the arts and culture, through her photographs.



*Midday traffic; view from
the Opera House*



*Golden dragons, symbols of nobility and power;
snake along a door of Thien Chu
(the Pagoda Leading to Heaven)*



Boat houses on Halong Bay

With colonial legacies, traditional treasures and modern life-styles fused together, Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is a charming place of shaded boulevards, attractive lakes and green parks which offer enjoyable walking tours. It is also a big city – with a population of 3.5 million people – filled with motorbikes, bicycles, cars, trucks and buses on its streets. Friends living in Hanoi described crossing the street in Hanoi as an art. Riders on motorbikes will not stop at crossings; they will only try to avoid hitting you. Indeed, my first experience of summoning up the courage to cross the busy Hanoi streets, where traffic lights did not exist, remain my first and lasting impression of the city.

Hanoi is a city of museums and art galleries. Numerous art shops have opened along the streets, particularly around Hoan Kiem Lake. I visited the National Fine Arts Museum, which presented a diversity of paintings, many of which were created in the traditional way with silk or lacquer, but it was obvious that western trends have an intense influence on Vietnamese painting. It was not difficult to spot the influences of Gauguin and other European masters. There were Cubist works depicting Vietnamese anti-colonialism, and these were especially interesting to me.

I wanted to learn more about the revolution against the colonisers, so I went to the Revolutionary Museum. The exhibition focused on the 19th century, beginning with the Vietnamese resistance against the French invasion, up till 1946. Old documents, paintings, photographs and artifacts formed part of the collections. I also went to Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, which impressed me tremendously. It was not a museum as a place that exhibited only old, rare, and exotic objects. Most of the objects were those made or used by the locals, and with video screens showing the making and use of the objects, I was able to appreciate the items and their contexts. The visit was completed with an attendance of the local performing arts, a popular water puppet entertainment show at the theatre on the lake.



House of the Bahnar, one of 50 minority groups in the highlands - an outdoor exhibit in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology



Large golden door knob of intricate relief



Museum of Vietnamese Revolution, a handsome colonial building



Embroidered picture with design of a lotus pond, Vietnamese handicraft



Traffic at downtown Hanoi



Thap Rua (Tortoise Tower) on an islet in Hoan Kiem Lake

According to a legend, a magic turtle once rose from the depths of the Hoan Kiem Lake to retrieve a sword, which the Emperor Le Loi used to drive out the Chinese invaders, giving the lake its name, Ho Hoan Kiem, which means 'Lake of the Restored Sword'.

"If you want to see Hanoi, you can't miss Hoan Kiem Lake," Ying, my friend who lives in Vietnam, has said. I agree with her. There was a vibrancy of life on the sidewalks around the lake, where old men and teenagers exercised in large groups, and where postcard/souvenir vendors and romantically-inclined couples wandered. The area seemed to be a meeting place and landmark for locals and tourists alike. I particularly liked being at the lakeside café, sipping coffee and observing the liveliness of the place.

During my travel in Hanoi, I often came across flower vendors carrying many kinds of flowers on their bicycles, and selling the flowers directly from their bikes. The ways they arranged the variety of flowers into bamboo baskets represented wonderful deftness and creativity. Pichet, my other friend who lives in Hanoi, told me that urban dwellers are fond of flowers, and during the Tet Festival (Vietnam's Lunar New Year), flowers can be found on altar and in the living room of every house. After Tet, he said, garbages in Hanoi consist of a great amount of flowers and blossom peach branches!



St. Joseph's Cathedral, a reminder of European Catholic influence



Early morning exercise at Thong Nhat Lake (Lenin Lake)



Flower trade show in the open-air market



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15. The bridge leading to Tran Quoc Pagoda
16. A door guardian, gracing the entrance to a pagoda
17. Offering of burning incense in Ngoc Son Temple
18. Ho Tay (West Lake), also known as the Lake of Mist
19. A variety of foodstuffs for sale in local market
20. The Presidential Palace, originally the residence of the Governor-General of Indochina
21. Traditional food; a bowl of nuoc mam (fish sauce) is indispensable at a Vietnamese meal
22. A young vendor with his handmade mini-models
23. Embroidered silk banners hang in the hall of Ngoc Son Temple
24. A woman collecting pond snails in West Lake



Top: Souvenirs in the Old Quarter

Left: Tran Quoc Pagoda, on an islet off the shore of West Lake

Right: Rice for sale in the Old Quarter (rice is a Vietnamese staple)

The Old Quarter, north of Hoan Kiem Lake, also known as 36 Street, is a fascinating maze of narrow streets. The names of these streets reflect the wares that used to be sold there. On 36 Street, the opportunities to use up my Dongs (local currencies) were limitless. On display and sale was a variety of products, such as printed T-shirts, silk products, paintings, ethnic handicrafts, lacquerware, water puppets and so on. The majority of budget travellers would know Hanoi's Old Quarter of backpackers' hotels, internet cafés, travel agencies and restaurants; but even though this area serves tourists, its function for the local people has not changed – the residents of Hanoi still shop there as they have been doing for hundreds of years.



Elaborate façade of the entrance to One Pillar Pagoda

Food and paper money prepared for departed souls

One Pillar Pagoda honours Quan The Am Bo Tat, the Goddess of Mercy

A French legacy in Vietnam: baguettes

A large drum in the Temple of Literature

Hoan Kiem Lake is not the only lake in the city; there are eighteen lakes in Hanoi, West Lake being the biggest. Apart from lakes, you are also never far away from a temple or pagoda. I visited the One Pillar Pagoda, a monument made entirely of wood. This famous tourist attraction rests on a single stone column in a pond. Not far from it is the Temple of Literature, which was dedicated to Confucius, the Chinese philosopher. It was built – as Vietnam's first university – for the sons of princes and mandarins in the 11th century.



*Top: Children in a daycare centre
Bottom: Journey along the river to the Perfume Pagoda*

A trip around Hanoi would not be complete without a visit to Perfume Pagoda, the most spectacular cave grotto in Ha Tay province, about 60 km from the capital. It is a complex of pagodas and Buddhist shrines built into the limestone cliffs of Huong Tich Mountain (Mountain of the Fragrant Traces). To get there, we took a bus for two hours on a narrow road, and rode on a boat for about an hour along scenic waterways between limestone cliffs and paddy fields. During March and April here, the stream is filled with small rowboats on which Buddhist pilgrims travel to the cave grotto to pray for good fortune. My friends and I spent about two hours climbing hundreds of steps to the cave grottoes above the temple. We were told by our Vietnamese guide that some cave grottoes were shelters for Vietnamese nationalists during the colonial period. Upon reaching the top of the hill, we were rewarded with a spectacular view of the valley.



*Top: Embroidered silk banners hang from the eaves of Thien Chu Bell Tower
Bottom: The gate to Thien Chu (of Perfume Pagoda)*



37. Animal statue in Thien Chu courtyard

38. Roof detail of Thien Chu Bell Tower

39. The gate of a pagoda

40. Altar watchman's belongings on the floor

41. The valley and fields among the limestone mountains of Huong Tich Mountain

42. In the courtyard of Thien Chu

43. Thien Chu Bell Tower

44. In front of the monks' residence in Thien Chu

45. One of the wooden statues in Thien Chu



A community of fishermen in Cat Ba Harbour cluster together for companionship



Fruit vendor peddling



View from one of the cave grottoes

Halong Bay, a popular site for tourists, was a destination that I have long wished to visit. My journey to the picturesque site, 150 km from Hanoi, was a two-day trip. Considered to be Vietnam's greatest natural wonder, the bay is dotted with 3,000 islands, and was designated a World Heritage site in 1994. Halong, which means "Alighting Dragon", derives its name from a legend that says the region's topography was created by the lashing of a dragon's tail as it made its way from mountain to sea.

Traveling in a junk named "The Soul of Sea", we were taken to islands and grottoes in the bay. On the way, many local vendors on rowboats came alongside the junk to sell their products, snacks, variety of fruits, fresh crabs and shrimps. Cat Ba Island, the largest island in Halong Bay, was our last destination. It is a fast growing town, full of hotels, restaurants, and karaoke bars. If you seek serenity, it would be better to stay overnight on the boat. My friends and I chose to spend time in the evening sitting at a table on the waterfront, drinking fresh sugarcane juice, and watching people and the water flow by. Vietnam offered many places and ambience for such silent observation of life passing by. ■



Floating minimart



No urban parking problems here



Leaving a magnificent Halong Bay



Top Left: Traditional Vietnamese architecture; the Temple of Literature

Top Right: Wild, or Mountain rice, being grown at Hoi An, southwest of Hanoi

Bottom Left: Three thousand islands rise from Halong Bay

Bottom Right: Monument of Martyrs, Hoan Kiem Lake



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56. *Thien Chu Bell Tower*

57. *Bun rieu, crab-paste noodle soup*

58. *House of the Bahnar*

59. *The gate to Thien Chu (Pagoda Leading to Heaven)*

60. *Fisherfolk plying the water of Halong Bay*

61. *Roof detail of Thien Chu Bell Tower*