



## *Vibrant Vietnam has lots to offer*

*Story & pictures by Mansoor Ladha*

Now I know how a millionaire feels to be rich. When I exchanged the U.S. dollar to local currency at the airport in Hanoi, Vietnam, one U.S. dollar fetched 23,196.68 Vietnamese dang. I felt like a millionaire for the first time in my life when I exchanged \$100 U.S. I received 2,319,668.00 dang – unless I am fortunate enough to win a Lotto, I am sure I'll never have that many dollars in my life!



***Above: Limestone islands jut out of the ocean in Ha Long Bay attracting thousands of tourists to take a closer look.***

My wallet couldn't even accommodate all the currency and I had to use two pockets of my cargo pants to hold all my loot. Feeling like a millionaire, I pompously went shopping later on.

A few days in Hanoi doesn't do justice. This cultural capital of Vietnam has many attractions to see and things to do. Fortunately, most attractions are within walking distance of one another. These include the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum to honour one of the most important Vietnamese leaders; the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Hoan Kiem Lake (Turtle Lake), a popular hangout for locals and foreigners. Linked by a red bridge lies Ngoc Son Temple.





*Above: A rock formation, dubbed the kissing rocks, is a favourite site for visitors in Ha Long Bay.*

Hanoi is a shopper's paradise. One can buy everything in Hanoi. I just stepped out of my hotel in the old district and I was right in the shoppers' paradise district with vendors and hawkers, clamouring for my dang. This part of Hanoi is filled with vendors selling fruits to vegetables to shops with shoes and luggage. You name it, they have it. I highly recommend staying in Hanoi Old Quarter, a lively area where tourists can enjoy fine examples of colonial architecture packed along narrow streets. is the city's ultimate shopping spot and full of cafes and restaurants to indulge in some delicious Viet cuisine.

Everywhere you go, you could see that Hanoi's residents don't settle for a large lunch, instead preferring to graze on snacks throughout the day. While walking on my own, I discovered some of the city's best culinary spots. It was an experience to



***Fresh fruits are in abundance at the Hanoi market.***

visit Dong Xuan Market in the Old Quarter which was crammed with sidewalk stalls serving *bun dau* – hunks of tofu in hot noodle soup or *banh xeo* – crispy fried shrimp pancakes. Suggest you end your tour at Café Giang, opened since 1946, and try its signature egg coffee which was devised during the war when eggs replaced heavily rationed milk.

One of the landmarks worth visiting in Hanoi's French Quarter is the Hotel Metropole, now the Sofitel Legend Metropole, built in 1901. It used to be a hangout for celebrities and diplomats and it has the distinction of being the longest running hotel in the city. Workers building a new bar recently unearthed a 1960s bomb shelter in the hotel. Metropole, the only hotel in the city with a bomb shelter and an anti-aircraft gun on the roof, offers guided tours of the war relics.

The three-wheeled rickshaws, manufactured in India, commonly called tuk tuk, or rickshaws, are to be found everywhere, urging you to ride. I was glad that I rejected all overtures for a ride and chose to walk the whole afternoon, getting an





*A leisurely ride in a rickshaw is always available for those who prefer not to walk.*

opportunity to mingle with the locals I met and a chance to take some remarkable pictures. Vietnamese people are friendly and seem to realize the contribution that tourism has been making to their economy. They would smile and willingly pose for pictures.

***Right: A newly married couple take a stroll in one of the streets in Hanoi.***







*A sidewalk store sells shoes and slippers of every type you need.*

A common sight you will come across while traveling along Vietnam is that of local ladies donning the *Non La* (Vietnamese conical leaf hat), walking gracefully along the sidewalk. The *Non La*, a traditional symbol of Vietnam, which like many other traditional costumes of the country, has an original story that comes from a legend. The legend has it that once upon a time during a torrential downpour that lasted for weeks, a goddess wearing a giant hat made of leaves stitched together by bamboo sticks descended from the sky. Her hat was so large that it sheltered the people against the rain, later allowing the residents to return to their normal lives.

People went into the forests to find similar leaves that the goddess had and stitched together on a bamboo frame which has since then become an indispensable item for farmers on the paddy fields and anyone else who wanted to protect themselves from the scorching sun.



Another local legend pertains to Ha Long Bay area, a four-hour drive from Hanoi, where it is believed Vietnamese gods sent mother dragon and her children to earth to help the people defend their country. The dragons carved large valleys and gorges with their tails, creating Ha Long Bay. Those who have watched the limestone pillars jut out of the early morning mist have appreciated the mystical importance of the story to the Vietnamese people. Some of the rocks have gradually eroded forming a network of caves and arches which have presented a popular tourist exploration site. Ha Long Bay, declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, has 1,969 limestone islands jutting out of the ocean.

Chinese sailing boats, called junks, which were introduced in Vietnam during



***Junks used to transport good and people have been converted to comfortable passenger boats.***

the 14<sup>th</sup> century, have become an important part of Vietnamese culture. Junks are used to transport goods and people but more recently, they have been converted into comfortable passenger boats, offering one-or-two-night cruises. Junks are a familiar sight and mostly used by tourists in Ha Long Bay.



***Travel writer Mansoor Ladha poses with Vietnamese ladies wearing traditional attire.***

An island close to Ha Lang Bay is Quan Lan, which holds an annual festival to mark a historic victory against Mongol invaders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During the two-week celebrations held in June, villagers are forbidden to leave the island, but guests are warmly welcomed.

Every year, Ha Long City holds the Carnaval Ha Long when locals dressed in colourful traditional costumes dance their way through the streets, persuading those watching to participate also.

Another major event to look for is Tet, the Vietnamese New year, which falls in late January or February. During the celebrations which is held throughout



Vietnam, towns, cities and even boats decorate themselves in yellow and red to signify good luck.



***Outdoor eating on the sidewalk is a Vietnamese pastime. Friends get together for a snack at their favourite restaurant and exchange the day's news.***

Crossing a busy street in Vietnam can be dangerous and nerve-wrecking. There is constant traffic on the roads, with vehicles and motor bikes, passing through ignoring pedestrians' right of way. When we arrived from the airport, the driver dropped us on the street in front of the hotel. No one had the courtesy to stop or slow down to allow four of us, carrying suitcases and other belongings, to cross the street. Instead, the traffic whisked past us, majority of them honking to get out of the way. Pedestrians may find themselves perplexed when trying to get from one side of the street to the other. With so many motorbikes zipping around, one has to learn the art of how to allow them to dodge around you. If you stand around waiting for them to stop, you'll be waiting a long time.



***Most cafes in Hanoi are packed with Vietnamese men and women.***

It's unfortunate that the biggest problem of the country is that majority of Vietnamese don't speak even basic English, including waiters who work at brand name hotels catering for foreigners. Waiters do not even understand words like sugar and milk. Taxi drivers are the worst offenders as they cannot even read addresses in English given by their customers.

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*Above: A zumba session is underway in a public park in Hanoi so aggressively that even the two youngsters couldn't resist participating (below).*





Historically, Vietnam has undergone foreign occupation, governed by a series of Chinese dynasties, went through the French colonial era and participated in several wars which involved the U.S. and Viet Cong, the Communist guerrilla group operating in South Vietnam. The country is full of historical monuments from each era.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed in 1976 with hundreds of thousands of fleeing abroad, including many “boat people,” many of whom also came to Canada. Vietnam, with an estimated 94.6 million inhabitants in 2016 and considered to be the ninth<sup>th</sup> most populous Asian country, is increasingly becoming an attractive destination of economic development and tourism. The Communist government’s economic reforms have successfully changed Vietnam, making it a significant part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization of 10 countries in Southeast Asia and of the international community.

As a Communist country, police presence is evident everywhere. Our tour boat was escorted by a police throughout during our la Hong trip until we returned to shore while a VIP group of two people travelling was escorted by five uniform policemen. During the ATF 2019 convention, uniform policemen were to be seen at every entrance.







*Above: A police escort accompanied our boat while we were touring the Ha Long Bay while below five uniform policemen (below) escorted a VIP to his destination.*



\*Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based travel writer and author of *Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa for the West and A Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims*.

