



▶ BOATS DOTTED ON THE THU BON RIVER

Good morning, Hoi An!

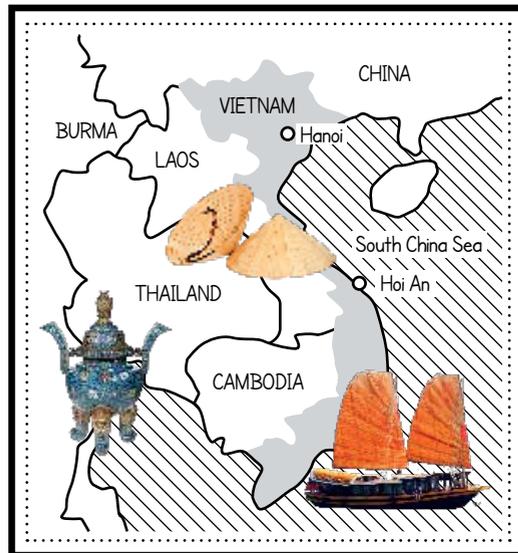
BY NICK DALL

A visit to Vietnam reveals a charming town and heavenly food

We've all seen a bit of Vietnam in war movies, and grainy black and white footage of Ho Chi Minh, but that was long ago. Now it's a rising star of a destination that offers a huge variety of scenery, cuisines and experiences at extremely affordable prices.

The coastal village of Hoi An is the real jewel in Vietnam's crown. A 30-minute drive from the central city of Da Nang, Hoi An was founded by the Chinese in the 15th century and was, at one point, the most important trading port in all of South-East Asia. These days, it's become a living, breathing museum on the banks of the languorous Thu Bon River. While some of the surrounding towns were less fortunate, Hoi An managed to escape being bombed in the war, so most of its centuries-old infrastructure remains to this day.

The narrow, cobbled streets are closed from motorised traffic during the day – it's easy to imagine what it must've been like in its heyday. Traditional 'tube houses' dominate the scene, but every so often there is an ornately decorated temple or bridge. Old ladies in conical hats vend peeled pineapples from bamboo baskets, while goateed men sell dumplings from their bicycles.



To get a good taste of the culture, buy a museum ticket: 120 000 VND grants you entry to five historical buildings of your choice.

Hoi An is not just about the culture though: you can shop till you drop, eat and drink till you are about to burst, and swim, snorkel and tan to your heart's content.

With this wide variety of attractions, it goes without saying that Hoi An is touristy ... but not in a tacky way. The people here are focused on doing what they do best – and marketing it to international guests.



▶ A FERRY TAKES LOCALS TO A NEARBY ISLAND

TAILOR-MADE

There are probably more tailors in Hoi An than there are in the whole of South Africa! They can craft anything from a pair of board shorts to three-piece suits to your exact specifications. And there are loads of

cobblers too. These tailors and cobblers will claim they can complete your order in 24 hours, but it's better not to rush them or haggle too much about prices. That way, there's a chance you'll get clothing that's made to last. One of the

most respected (and expensive!) tailors is Yaly (yaly.couture.com).

COOK UP A STORM

Hoi An is one of the traditional culinary centres of Vietnam, but today it plays host to a huge mix of top-notch

Where to stay

ANCIENT HOUSE RIVER RESORT & SPA

This idyllic spot is on a secluded bend in the river, just downstream of town. A luxury experience at affordable prices. www.ancienthouseriver.com

HAI AU HOTEL

One of many cheap hotels on Cua Dai Road, conveniently located between the beach and the ancient town, the Hai Au punches far above its weight. www.haiauhoteles.com

VINH HUNG 1 HOTEL

A converted traditional Chinese dwelling, this is the only hotel in the historical centre, which makes it far more authentic than anything else on offer. www.vietnamhotels.net.

Hot tip Most of the hotels in Vietnam use www.agoda.com for bookings. If you book through Agoda, you can get up to 50% off.

DESTINATION

Know before you go

► **CLIMATE** Hoi An has hot, dry summers (May to August), fairly cold, cloudy winters (December to February) and a very heavy rainy season (September to November).

CURRENCY R10 is equivalent to around 20 000 Vietnamese Dong (VND).

SAFETY Hoi An is very safe, but keep an eye on your valuables.

GETTING AROUND Walk in the town centre. Hire a bicycle or take a taxi if you want to go to

the beach or see more of the countryside.

TIME ZONE Vietnam is five hours ahead of South Africa.

LANGUAGE Vietnamese is hard to learn – luckily English is quite widely spoken in Hoi An.

GETTING THERE Singapore Airlines flies to Da Nang via Singapore a few times a week. Otherwise, Emirates and Qatar Airways have daily flights to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

international restaurants. The best of the bunch is Mango Rooms (www.mangorooms.com), which serves up delectable (although a little pricey) fusion food in an eclectic setting. For delicious local and international flavours try Hai Café (www.visithoian.com) or Cargo Club (www.restaurant-hoian.com). And don't forget to try the street food: cao lau noodles as well as what was voted the 'world's best sandwich' (created by celeb chef Anthony Bourdain) can be found in the market.



► **INCENSE STICKS BURN AT A SHRINE**

Cooking classes are a great way to learn more about the local culture. The classes usually include a tour of the Tra Que Herb Village, as well as the market. Two of the top courses on the scene at the moment are Morning Glory (www.restaurant-hoian.com)

and Red Bridge (www.visithoian.com), which also offers a boat trip on the Hoi An River.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Hoi An gives a real taste of what the country's all about, but do try visit other places too. Vietnam has cloud-skimming mountain ranges (like the ones near Sapa), palm-fringed beaches (Phu Quoc Island wins first prize) and frenetic modern cities (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City).

The majestic and mighty Mekong river wends its way through the southern half of the country, while the North is dominated by limestone formations that come close to perfection in Halong Bay. Whatever your itinerary, Vietnam will not disappoint. ◆

An undiscovered paradise – An Bang Beach

No visit to Hoi An is complete without a fair whack of beach time. The masses go to Cua Dai Beach, but An Bang Beach is actually Vietnam's best kept secret. Take a picture-perfect tropical beach, add a few rustic (yet chic) bars and restaurants, and throw in complimentary loungers and umbrellas, and you've got a little bit of heaven. The pizzas at Luna d'Autunno (www.lunadautunno.vn) are amazing, while La Plage (www.laplagehoian.com) is the genuine An Bang experience: commandeering a couch and stay all day, napping and swimming between meals.

