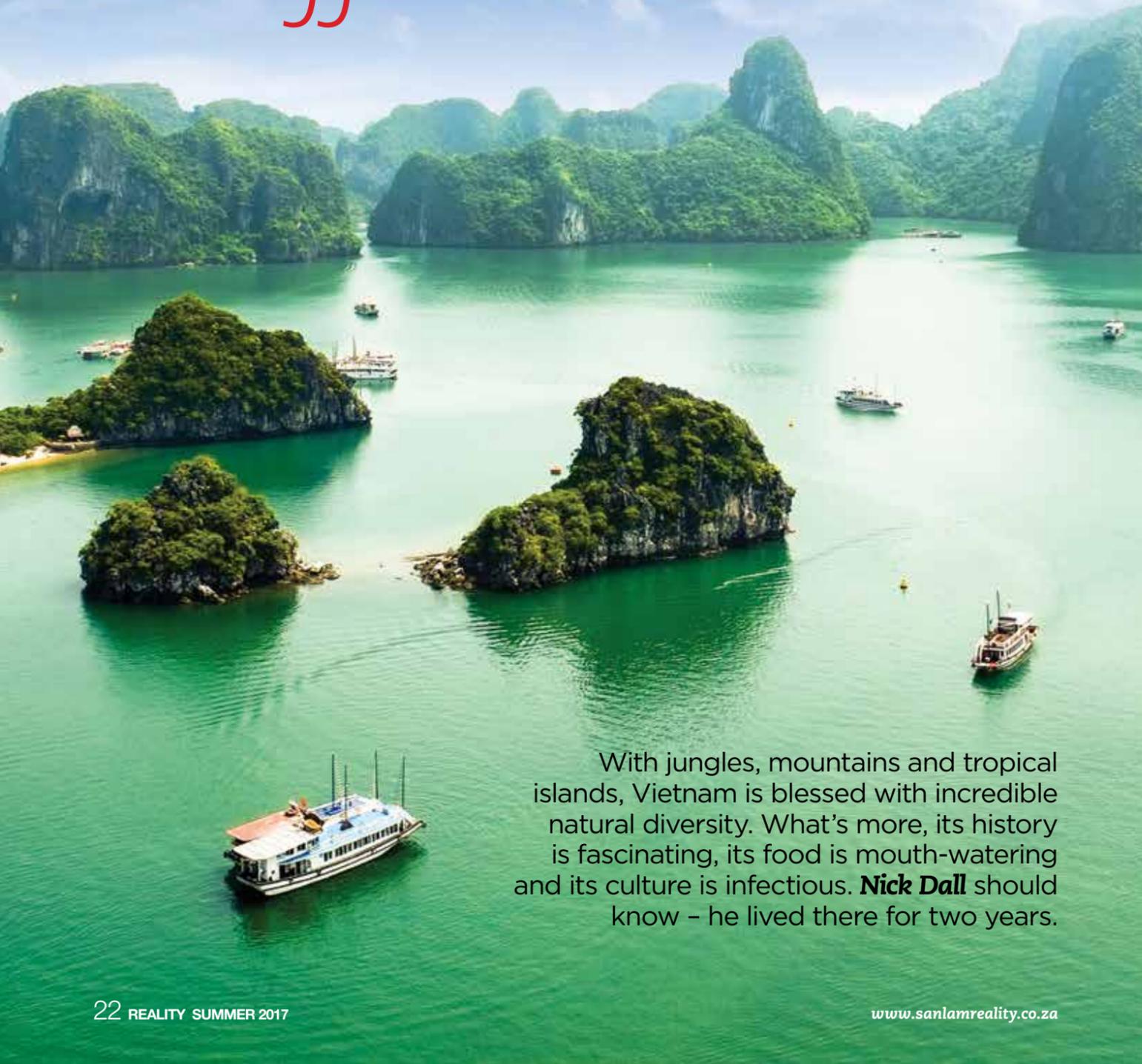


VIETNAM

affordable & exotic



With jungles, mountains and tropical islands, Vietnam is blessed with incredible natural diversity. What's more, its history is fascinating, its food is mouth-watering and its culture is infectious. **Nick Dall** should know – he lived there for two years.

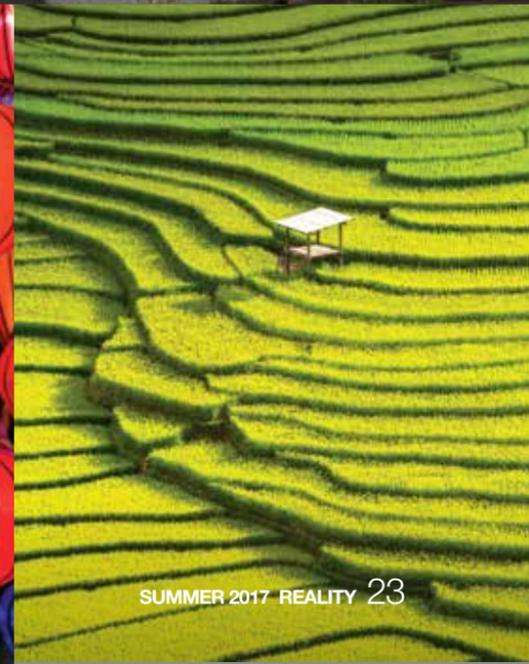


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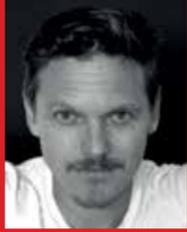


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Painting patterns with fishing nets near Hue; street vendors still wear traditional conical hats (nón lá) in Hoi An; Hanoi houses; terraced rice paddies near Sapa; traditional lamps for sale in old town Hoi An; a marble statue at Son Tra, Danang.

LEFT: Halong Bay is one of the world's greatest natural spectacles – this is an elevated view from Ti Top Island.



ROB VAN VUUREN
Comedian



ON OVERSEAS TRAVEL...

I have only ever been to Vietnam in the movies! I love Paris which I've visited several times and I also like Amsterdam where I once performed in a fringe comedy festival.



Bay of a thousand islands

Hanoi is lovely, but it's also frenetic and exhausting and you'll soon need some country air. Convenient, then, that it's only a few hours from one of the world's greatest natural wonders. The northern half of Vietnam is littered with limestone karsts (rocky 'islands') and their random scattering achieves haphazard perfection in Halong Bay, where more than 2000 islets are a photographer's dream at every turn.

The bay is best seen by boat, and there are loads of options available. Do some research on TripAdvisor to make sure that the boat has a good safety record and decent food. If you're travelling with youngsters, you could charter a smaller boat for yourselves. Regardless of which boat you choose, I'd strongly advise going for two or more nights. This allows you to reach less-populated, more pristine parts of the bay.

Depending on how long you go for, your itinerary will include excursions to floating villages and caves as well as family-friendly activities like snorkelling, kayaking and night-fishing for squid.

Spend a couple of nights back on land at the adventure capital of Vietnam. Over half of Cat Ba Island has been declared a national park, so the forests are untouched, the streams pristine and the beaches virgin. It's a great place for rock climbing, scuba diving or kayaking and there's good hiking and mountain biking. ▶

For most people Vietnam is defined by its war, but these days it's a peace-loving nation which is growing more prosperous by the day. This far eastern strip of a country bordering the South China Sea has everything a holidaying family could wish for, and it's one of the few places in the world where your rands will actually go somewhere.

Asia of old

Hanoi, Vietnam's historic capital, is just as you imagined ancient Asia to be. At its heart is the willow-fringed Hoàn Kiếm Lake, the very place where an enormous turtle is supposed to have swallowed Emperor Le Loi's magic sword. Neither the turtle nor the sword has been seen for a thousand years, but that's not to say you shouldn't look for it.

You'll have to pick your way through rows of grannies doing Tai Chi and fend off the advances of black market moneychangers, but it's worth it. Cross the red wooden bridge to Jade Island for your first taste of a Vietnamese pagoda, and afterwards indulge in a *ca phe sua da* - traditional Vietnamese iced coffee lashed with condensed milk - at a trendy lakeside cafe. Then take the kids to one of the highly enjoyable traditional 'water puppet' shows.

Hanoi radiates from Hoàn Kiếm Lake. The chaotic, claustrophobic and colourful Old

Quarter is fascinating and the French Quarter is all about sedate Parisian boulevards, fancy hotels and international fashion brands. But it's the area around the city's musty, gothic cathedral, on the western shore of the lake, which gets my vote for family fun.

The cobbled streets are wider than those in the Old Quarter and the city's notorious traffic is less frenzied here, which makes it a great neighbourhood to explore on foot, or - better still - in a *cyclo*. The kids will feel like kings as you cruise the streets atop your old-fashioned bicycle rickshaw... just be sure to negotiate a fee with the driver *before* setting off.

If you're a fan of the macabre, head on over to the terrifically imposing Ho Chi Minh mausoleum for a glimpse of the great leader's embalmed body. Another hit with young ones is the so-called B-52 lake - a pea-green pond where a downed American bomber rests to this day.

For something a bit less surreal, I'd advise exploring the peaceful grounds of the Temple of Literature. At 950-years-old it is Vietnam's oldest university (quite something if you consider that UCT hasn't even made it to 200 yet). After you've checked out the temple, follow the scent of grilled pork to Bun Cha Van Mieu across the street for a bowl of sweet, fatty, tangy goodness that will change your life forever.

ABOVE: Khue Van is one of the ornate gates into the Temple of Literature which, founded nearly 1000 years ago, is the first university in Vietnam.

“ You'll have to pick your way through rows of grannies doing Tai Chi and fend off the advances of black market moneychangers, but it's worth it. ”

TOP: The central roundabout between Hoàn Kiếm Lake and the Old Quarter is a popular gathering spot in Hanoi.

ABOVE: Over 2000 limestone karsts make Halong Bay a unique site, which is best explored over a few days by boat.



NICK'S FAVOURITE STREET FOODS

- **Pho:** Pronounced 'fur', is the country's most famous dish. It's a spicy beef broth, swimming with noodles, herbs and sliced chicken or beef.
- **Bun cha:** The one dish I still crave is a Hanoian lunchtime staple consisting of thin rice noodles, braaied pork rashers sopped up by a lukewarm soup of fish sauce and garlic.
- **Banh mi:** A pint-sized baguette stuffed with slow-roasted pork belly, paté, pickled daikon, a fried egg and more. The sandwiches at Banh My Phuong in Hoi An have been voted the world's best.
- **Pho cuon:** Healthy and delicious, these fresh spring rolls comprise prawn or pork (or both) and fresh herbs in a soft rice noodle wrapping.
- **Banh xeo:** Moreish, deep-fried crepes made from rice flour and coconut milk and filled with pork, prawns and sprouts.



ALSO WORTH SEEING

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon): HCMC is Vietnam's biggest city and its economic hub. It's also home to the gruesome but poignant War Remnants Museum and the nearby Cu Chi tunnels – an underground labyrinth used by the Viet Cong.

Phu Quoc: This tropical island paradise is the nation's primary producer of fish sauce; and it's great for snorkelling and scuba diving.

Hue: Set on a meandering river, the old imperial capital is lovely; make time to see the mausoleums outside town too.

Caves near Dong Hoi: Phong Nha and Paradise Cave are magnificent, and the recently-discovered Son Doong is the largest cave in the world.

Sapa: This mountain retreat, an overnight train ride from Hanoi, offers cool respite, great views and a chance to connect with minority tribes.

EMIRATES

If possible, avoid Cat Ba on weekends in June, July and August – this is high-season for local tourism, and the place loses some of its rugged, natural allure.

Where time stands still

My absolute favourite spot in 'Nam is the coastal village of Hoi An, an hour's flight from Hanoi. Founded by the Chinese in the 15th century, it was once the most important trading port in the whole of south-east Asia. It's now a living, breathing museum on the banks of the languorous Thu Bon River, and only escaped destruction thanks to an open-minded American general who refused to bomb such a gem.

Its narrow, cobbled streets are closed to motorised traffic, so it's easy to imagine what it must have been like in its heyday. Traditional 'tube houses' (narrow single-storey houses with small street frontage) dominate the scene, but

every so often there is an ornately decorated temple or bridge. Meanwhile, crones in conical hats peel pineapples to order and goateed men sell dumplings from modified bicycles with charcoal burners above their back wheels.

There are more tailors in this tiny village than there are in the whole of South Africa. They can craft anything from a three-piece suit to a pair of board-shorts to your exact specifications in a matter of days. There are also loads of art galleries, craft studios and off-the-peg clothes shops.

If the beach is more your thing, take a taxi (or rent a scooter) and head out to An Bang Beach. The water is always warm, the beer is always cold and the seafood is always freshly caught. For the best day ever, arrive early and bag a hammock or a lounger at one of the low-key restaurants. Then spend the next eight hours swimming, reading, napping and feasting. ▸

ABOVE: Established as a hill station by the French in 1922, Sapa is home to several ethnic minorities and is a popular trekking base in the Hoàng Liên Son Mountains of northwestern Vietnam.

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Hoi An is one of the traditional culinary centres of Vietnam, but these days it plays host to top notch international restaurants too. The best of the bunch is Mango Rooms which serves up delectable fusion food in an eclectic setting. The street food is also epic (see box, page 25) and Vietnamese cooking classes a real hit. These usually include a tour of the Tra Que herb gardens and the town's bustling market. The best part? You get to eat everything you cook.

The time is now

Vietnam has, at various times during its long history, been occupied by the Chinese, French, Japanese and Americans, but its people and their spirit have always triumphed in the end. Nowadays the only conflict is between the past and the present, and it is a fascinating duel to witness. Never has Vietnam been more itself than it is now, so get there before the rest of the world cottons on. ■

RIGHT: This is the only kind of traffic you'll experience in Hoi An, Vietnam's most atmospheric town.

BELOW: The Japanese Bridge in Hoi An – the 15th century town is a World Heritage Site.



TRAVEL PLANNER

Getting there

Several airlines fly regularly to both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. A good option for South Africans is Emirates, which flies daily from Cape Town, Joburg and Durban to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City via Dubai.

Climate

Hanoi has cold, wet winters (December – February) while central and southern Vietnam are hot all-year-round and wet in summer (June – September).

Currency and costs

R10 buys you 15 000 Vietnamese Dong (VND). US dollars are widely used in tourist areas. A bowl of pho from a street vendor will cost about R25 while a beer at an upmarket dining chain will set you back about R40.

Language and safety

You should be able to find someone who speaks (broken) English in most tourist areas. And while Vietnam is much safer than South Africa, always keep an eye on valuables.



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