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By Gary Hacker and re-posted at his request.

A JAUNT TO HANOI

Hanoi, Vietnam, was for decades a small and little known Southeast Asian City. Then international headlines proclaimed the involvement of America against Vietnam 's fight to reclaim the South half of their country. Long dominated by the French colonists, until a revolution sparked national pride and gained them the North, the Vietnamese finally moved against the South resulting in one of the world's longest and largest fiascoes with the powerful French and American military being defeated by the Vietnamese soldiers who carried the motivation in their hearts for the right to take back what was rightfully theirs.

Time has passed and the capital city of Hanoi has progressed into an exciting if chaotic destination for seeking out adventure. I did just that with a four day City Expat Club Tour last week and have returned with the desire to again visit Hanoi for a more extended trip.

Vietnam Currency is the "Dong". One US Dollar equals about 16,500 Dong. One Hundred Thai Baht gets slightly less than 49,000 Dong.

Air Asia offers inexpensive airfare for the less than two hour journey from Bangkok. The new airport, built 25 minutes north of town, offers taxis and buses that continuously connect to the City. Our group stayed at the Vietnam Trade Union Hotel which was satisfactory but expensive for the location and facilities at \$85 a night. After two days of snooping around the City, I quickly discovered that the place to stay is in proximity to Hoan Kiem Lake, an enchanting body of water and the epicenter of Old Hanoi. The area north of the Lake is delightful. The narrow streets are bursting with activity and the small shops and stores are rewarding with their unusual merchandise and artwork. Small restaurants abound and the several I tried were simply fantastic. But first let's talk about hotels:

There are at least a dozen single and double shop house hotels in this bustling area. "The Green Mango" (18 Hang Quat Street) has deluxe rooms for \$55 along with an attractive looking restaurant and lounging area. "The Prince Hotel" (#8 To Tich Street) is another find, slightly less spacious but starting at \$25 a night including breakfast. The third choice on Hang Hom Street, I hesitate to divulge until I have had a chance to visit it myself. The room I saw was simply elegant with dark wood, canopy bed and hardwood floors and a downstairs parlor that reeked of charm. Their restaurant looked intimate and classy. That upscale room that I drooled over was \$35 a night.

Stopping for lunch I introduced myself and engaged a local businessman in conversation; I quizzed him about where to eat in Hanoi. " Gary," he replied, "our town is full of good restaurants and a few really great ones. For those of us whose appetites crave magnificent food, there are rewards to be found. Walk to the south head of the Lake and on a corner, you will discover Bobby Chinn's. This place has been promoted on your CNN and on several TV shows in the States; the food found here can compete with the finest dining anywhere." He was right. That night I discovered not only a great rack of lamb but an intimate bar that made some of the best cocktails in Asia.

The Metropole Hotel of French Colony fame has been totally remodeled by Sofitel and features the "Le Beaulieu French Restaurant", rumored to offer the finest French food in the North. "This is the most delicious cuisine anywhere," the young hostess bragged. Her dashing French outfit and comical manner made it difficult for me not to scoop her up and carry her away with me.

But even the smaller restaurants can often compete in charm and quality with their rich brothers. “La Restaurant & Bar” (Ly Quoc Su Street) has been run by a Canadian National for eleven years and by personal experience I can describe the place in one word: “wonderful”. The braised lamb shanks and soft shell crab defy description. My companion for the evening, John Williams, is still raving about this tiny find. And for true Vietnamese food, “Lan Vien” (37 Ly Thuong Kiet St.) located two blocks south of the lake has an intimate upstairs dining room that attracts much of the local business crowd.

In Thailand, we have silk shops and pricey offerings such as “Jim Thompson”. Sadly, some Thai silk can be fake or can be gorgeous and ultra-expensive as in the case of Thompson. But in Hanoi, quality silk is woven into unique articles of clothing, tablecloths and bedding. And it is not expensive. Try “Sapa Shop” (Hang Bong St.) or one of the many shops on the block.

Art work in Hanoi is of a much higher quality than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. I was astounded by what I saw at the “Hoang Son Gallery” (20 Hang Bong St.) and at the “Song Thu Gallery” on Ly Quoc Su Street . The smiling proprietor at “Doan Lan Huong” (36 Trang Tien Street) knows her art and is quite helpful.

I have ridden motorbikes in Bangkok and in most of Cambodia and Lao but never have I been so in awe and so scared as on the streets of Hanoi. Intersections, even with stoplights, are a free-for-all. Bikes move in all directions, head on, weaving in and out and brushing by you as they pass. I felt at risk for my life whenever I ventured out on the streets. So if you are brave enough or crazy enough, the “Hai Lan Shop” (68 Hang Bac) rents Honda Waves for \$5 per day. Taxis are the norm, with most flag drops at 9,000 Dong and fares that usually total about 30,000 Dong (or a couple of US Dollars). But be cautious of up clocked meters. I discovered one in a cab, stopped him, got out and boarded another taxi.

Now listen closely to what I'm saying: A “Must Do” adventure four hours north of Hanoi is the enchanting “Halong Bay”. Featured in the movie, “Indochine”, it is an almost unimaginable picturesque scene out of a meandering dream. In 1994, UNESCO recognized it as one of the wonders of the world and granted it the designation of a “National Heritage site.” Close your eyes and picture an archipelago of stony islands jutting straight up out of the sea. There are over 900 islands in this protected bay of clear blue water with 1,000 species of fish and 160 species of coral. I had the feeling of being in a fairy land with towering hump shaped islands, some covered with thick green vegetation on colorful rock formations. Thien Cung and Cai Bau Island have dramatic caverns like you will never see again. The Halong Port has a collection of wood boats, many with plush interiors that rival four star hotels with staterooms beckoning guests to stay aboard for two and three day cruises. Fresh seafood dinners and a captivating crew welcome you to dine and live on an Asian vessel while you cruise the sea and enjoy vistas such as you can only imagine. I asked our skipper, "Can you supply me with a cute Vietnamese companion?" He replied, " Gary, most anything is possible in Viet Nam , but that's a tough one." For details (on the cruise), contact “Lien” at Kim Tours in Hanoi for prices and booking. A one day trip to sail on Halong Bay, including transportation and seafood lunch, can be arranged for as low as \$65 a person.

Halong Bay coupled with time spent in Hanoi provides an interlude of adventure and a memorable holiday that you will remember for years to come. It is a largely undiscovered hidden destination that you should rapidly make plans to visit.

Would I go back? "You betcha!"

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