



Halong Bay is named after the mythical dragon which plunged into the sea and broke up the rocks



enter the *dragon*

WORDS: CLAIRE BOOBYER

FROM SAMPLING DELICIOUS
FRAGRANT STREET FOOD IN HANOI,
TO DISCOVERING THE TRIBAL
PEOPLE OF MOUNTAINOUS SAPA,
NORTHERN VIETNAM HAS MUCH TO
OFFER THE TRAVELLER BOTH ON
AND OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Hanoi has always been a city on the move – quite literally. Before settling in its current location, the Vietnamese capital had three previous addresses. During its 3000-year history, the capital has been known by many different names, too, including Thang Long, or City of the Soaring Dragon. However, the moniker chosen by Emperor Tu Duc in 1831 seems to have stuck. Hanoi translates as The City in a Bend of The River; a reference to the capital's location alongside the Red River. Despite its peripatetic past, Hanoi's Oriental, French and Communist history is firmly embedded in its streets, politics and culture.

Today Hanoi is a clatter of activity amid a motorbike swarm of youthful vitality. It has shaken off its Marxist economic coil and embraced capitalism in a no-holds barred race to become the capital of a middle-income country by 2020. It is this quest, tangible in the fuggy, misty air of a Hanoi spring day, that makes it such an intensely exciting place to visit.

The tinkering trades and crafts of the artisan have thrived here for more than a thousand years. When the Hanoi citadel was built, a service quarter was established to meet the needs of the royal citadel. Today, this Old Quarter is the epitome of Vietnamese charm and a highlight of any visit to Hanoi. Its streets still throb with the sound of age-old artisanal tradition. The clang and bang of Tin Street lie right next to the colourful threads of Silk Street while the mysterious liquids of Medicine Street are piled up on pavement stalls. Packed into this warren of narrow streets, with electricity wires overhead, you will also find boutique shops, bars and restaurants and a clutter of street-food stalls serving up steaming *pho* (beef noodle soup) and palm-juice dumplings.

Hanoi's culinary credentials are second to none. Understanding what's smoking, steaming and spitting on the street is difficult with the language barrier, but foodies can take an insightful mealtime excursion with Hidden Hanoi (hiddenhanoi.com.vn) to sample street-food restaurants, local concoctions and various market delicacies.

The fusion of Oriental and French architecture in Hanoi has created a charming city of temples and lakes mixed with *belle époque* glamour. Adding to the city's urban charm are tree-lined boulevards, thronging with the hum of a million motorbikes while curlicues of steam rise from the street-side grills. A visit to Hanoi should also take in the imposing granite mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, father of the Vietnamese nation, the scarlet Sunbeam Bridge over Hoan Kiem Lake, the hallowed Temple of Literature, and the Hanoi 'Hilton', the infamous prison-turned-museum where American POWs were incarcerated.

From Hanoi, head east to Halong Bay. Out of the liquid mix of the teal, mint green and emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin soar hundreds of tall, angular limestone rocks, covered with bushes and ferns that cling to the perpendicular stony hunks. Scattered across the sea like solidified pillars of pumice, their origins are, according to legend, the result of a

dragon that plunged into the sea and thrashed its tail around carving the rocks out of the bay; 'Halong' means descending dragon. A night in the bay, aboard a junk boat, such as the *Emeraude* or *Jewel of the Bay*, is magical. By night, listen to the unearthly silence under the stars; by day, kayak around and visit grottoes stuffed with stalagmites and stalactites. On Cat Ba Island, the largest inhabited isle in the bay, adventurers and wildlife-lovers can rock climb and search for the world's last remaining troupe of white-headed langur monkeys.

Southwest of Halong Bay, and encircling Ninh Binh, a provincial capital, are a cluster of sights that can be visited over a few days on an organised tour. Boat along the Yen River to Huong Tich Mountain (Mountain of the Fragrant Traces) in a *sampan* (an attractive, wooden, flat-bottomed boat) and pay homage at the shrine to Quan Am (Goddess of Mercy) at the Perfume Pagoda. At delightful Hoa Lu, the

remains of the 10th-century capital of Vietnam can be visited. Enter the petite temples built for the early kings, and inside, in the dimmed light, catch a glimpse of the elegant statues of rulers and their families.

Southeast of Ninh Binh, the imposing rooftops of Phat Diem – a stone, Oriental-meets-European cathedral – rise out of the flat paddy fields. It's an incongruous sight in predominantly Buddhist Vietnam: visitors are greeted by the outstretched hands of a Christ statue rising out of a huge pond at the entrance to the building complex. A few years before the demise of French Indochina in 1954, the cathedral was damaged in fighting nearby. Graham Greene, who witnessed the action, captured the artillery shell fall-out in his novel *The Quiet American*.

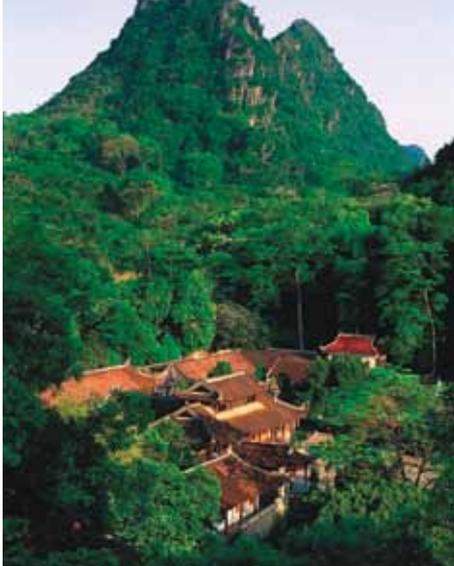
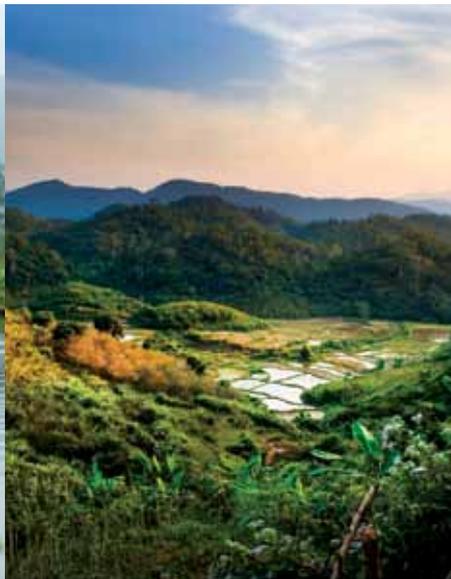
At Cuc Phuong National Park, southwest of Phat Diem, the forest fills with the flutter of yellow and white butterflies in April and May. The fascinating Endangered Primate Rescue Center, home to some 15 species of monkey, is open year-round.

Back in Hanoi, take the overnight train to the capital of the northwestern region, Sapa – booking yourself a seat in one of the Indochine-chic polished wood carriages of the Victoria Express is a particularly stylish way to travel. High in the Hoang Lien Son Mountains, close to the Chinese border, Sapa is a former cooler-climes highland retreat used by the French to escape the summer humidity of Hanoi. Some remnants of the lovely French buildings remain, but its architectural outlook is now more Vietnamese than French.

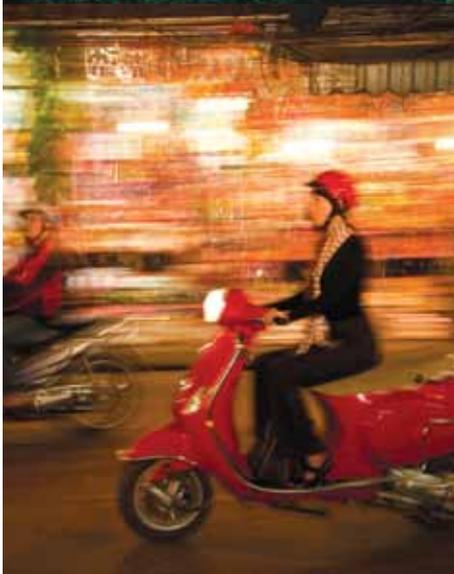
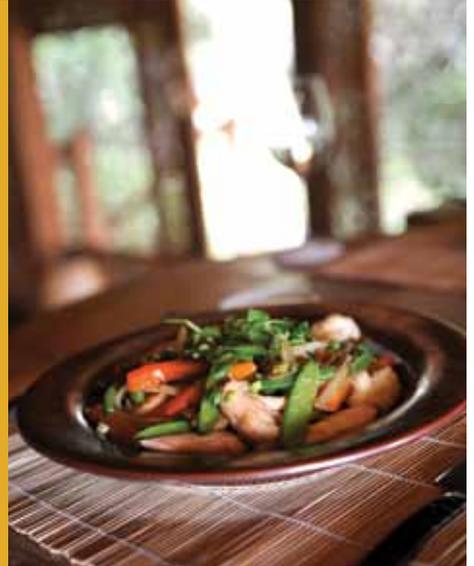
The surrounding region, dominated by Fan Si Pan, Vietnam's tallest mountain, is home to dozens of ethnic minorities and Sapa itself was originally inhabited by the Black Hmong – immigrants from southern China who moved to Vietnam in the 19th century – before Jesuits discovered the area in the early 20th century. Today, the Black Hmong peddle their indigo-dyed wares, and the Red Dao people, with their beautiful scarlet headdresses embroidered with dangling coins or tassels, sell jewellery and beadwork.

Most visitors to Sapa strike out for overnight treks that allow for a ▶





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Vietnam is home to architectural wonders such as the Perfume Pagoda, built into Huong Tich Mountain (centre left) and Phat Diem cathedral (bottom centre), while its famous cuisine delights food lovers. In contrast to the tranquility of rural areas, the city of Hanoi (bottom left) buzzes with activity and commerce



Today the Black Hmong people peddle their indigo-dyed wares and the Red Dao sell jewellery and beadwork

more intimate experience of this intensely cultivated land and its minority people. Hollowed-out bamboo trunks carry water across a landscape beautifully sculpted with terraced paddy fields. Here, you can navigate rice bunds through fields bursting with sprouting roots, past singing trickles of water weaving their way through the fertile earth, with birds chirruping and butterflies fluttering above. To get a little more off the beaten track, stay at Topas Ecolodge, 18 kilometres southeast of Sapa, where fewer trekkers tread. At Bac Ha, northeast of Sapa, the Sunday market draws ethnic minorities from around the region and is an intriguing snapshot of highland living. The Flower Hmong wear candy-pink and peppermint-green headdresses and carry babies trussed up on their backs wrapped in beautiful textiles embellished with threads and jewellery.

French history buffs should detour to Dien Bien Phu, site of the last battle of the French Indochina Empire in 1954, while those with little time, or those entranced by the terracing across the paddy fields, should make their way to Mai Chau, just two hours' drive southeast of Hanoi on the long road north to Sapa through the mountains. At Mai Chau, the encircling hills are carpeted in terracing which overflows with the luminescent emerald-green of the rice harvest. The attractive, stylised stilt houses of the White Thai that live here grace the landscape. Stay in a stilt house in Lac Village and enjoy time with your host family drinking rice wine, under the watchful eye of Ho Chi Minh, who stares out at you from the ubiquitous posters that adorn village houses.

On returning to Hanoi, swap the simple cuisine of the northern regions for the rich culinary offerings at the capital's smart French restaurants or its shabby-chic cafés in narrow Old Quarter houses. Or, if the flavours of the north still appeal, try Highway 4 and its sister bar The House of Son Tinh, a destination for rice wine connoisseurs. That is, if you haven't already had your fill of the 60 per cent-proof versions of these firewaters during your time in the north. Whether you are a connoisseur of wine, food, culture or history, there is so much to experience in this this fascinating country.

Above (left to right): Hmong women in the market at Bac Ha; birds in cages add to the soundscape; a local who has seen some of Vietnam's many changes

ESSENTIALS

Hanoi gets very hot between May and early November. From November to February, it can get chilly. Springtime has very comfortable temperatures, but avoid May and September when it rains a lot!

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

Delicious Vietnamese street food, as well as international cuisine, can be found in Hanoi. Meats, shellfish, rice, rice noodles and pungent herbs feature heavily. Heartier food is available in the more remote north. Local beer is known as *bia hoi* but

locally produced and international bottled beers are available. Iced coffee is a welcome and refreshing speciality – Vietnam is the world's second largest exporter of coffee.

WHAT IT COSTS

Good quality restaurant meal: £10
Iced coffee: 50p
Beer: around 75p a bottle
Bottled water: around 50p
Self-drive car hire is not available in Vietnam. Car hire with driver prices vary considerably, so do make sure that you shop around.

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