

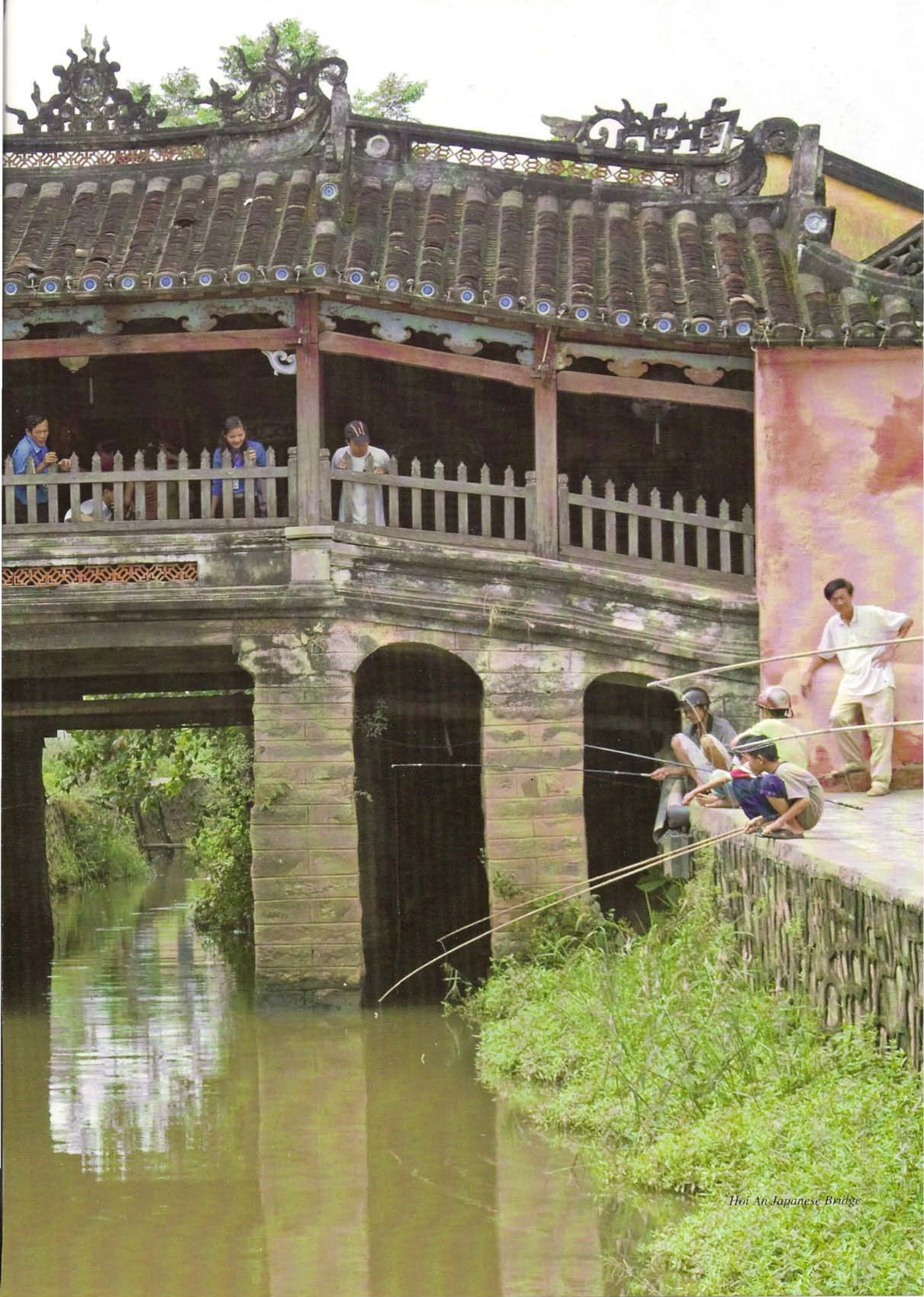


TRAVEL

Vietnam

*A Communist Country Riding
a Capitalist Wave*

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Hoi An Japanese Bridge



Halong Bay View

It will soon be September when Seoulites celebrate Chuseok but there is still time to use this Thanksgiving holiday to escape to the warmth. Why not Vietnam? Described as larger than Italy and looking like a bamboo pole supporting a basket of rice on each end, Vietnam is 1,600 kilometers of tropical coastline wrapping around the Indochinese Peninsula.

For those who want to be away for just the holiday weekend you could consider the finest resort in Vietnam, the Nam Hai. From Danang Airport this luxurious enclave is only 20 minutes south on China Beach, near Hoi An, the ancient trading port. Each villa has its own landscaped garden; some with a pool and all with spacious, ultra-modern wood and marble furnishings. The romance of Indochina has been captured in the silky muslin drapes that envelop each poster bed perched upon a split level teak-wood platform. Vaulted ceilings and spa baths entice you to order room service but you may change your mind after dining at the restaurant terrace.

Imagine a private table under a palm tree, the ocean barely visible but the night so quiet you can hear every wave. Your menu has a small reading light attached so as not to intrude upon this romantic ambience. Don't hesitate to ask Australian chef Kath Townsend to make something special for you. I ordered a platter of steamed crab with a tamarind sauce, steamed tiger prawns in

coconut juice, and squid stuffed with shitake mushrooms and coriander. This was accompanied by a lotus salad and when the bill arrived it was half the price I would have paid in Seoul, in spite of the luxurious surroundings.

The variety of Vietnamese food is staggering. While a part of China, the Vietnamese adopted Confucianism, Buddhism, chopsticks and the wok. Hanoi cuisine still reflects this Chinese influence with cooks relying on black pepper rather than chilies. They also prefer beef—possibly a lingering result of the 13th century Mongolian invasions. Vietnam's three centuries of French history is most evident in the south. Hotels here offer a baguette, yoghurt and orange juice for breakfast along with traditional Vietnamese pancakes and *bun xao* (beef noodles). The south is best known for the most important ingredient in all of Vietnamese cuisine—fish sauce or *nuoc mam*. Many Vietnamese dishes include lemongrass and kaffir lime leaves, and unlike Chinese food, little oil is used which is good news for the weight-conscious.

If you plan to tour Vietnam this fall begin in my favorite city, Hanoi. Yes, Vietnam is a Communist state run from Hanoi, but No, this will not intrude upon your enjoyment of this charming, slow-paced and conservative capital city. Hanoi has beautiful shaded boulevards and the exquisite jewel of Hoan Kiem Lake at



Nam Hai Resort Villa bedroom

its center. We stayed in the Old Quarter, with its labyrinth of narrow streets, food stalls, and rich street life. It was a comfortable stroll to the lake to view the 18th century pagoda Thap Rua on the center island, and we particularly enjoyed the Jade Mountain Temple (Den Ngoc Son) that we walked to over a red pedestrian bridge. On one early morning walk we saw hundreds of locals moving rhythmically in groups through their *tai chi chuan* exercises.

It would be remiss not to recommend that you take a Peditaxi cab early one morning to Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum as it only opens from 8 am to 11 am Tuesday to Thursday. On our return we stopped to admire the beaux-arts-style Hanoi Opera House and then lunched across the street at the five-star Metropole Hotel where Graham Greene wrote *The Quiet American*. Some of you may remember this locale as the place where Jane Fonda made her infamous broadcast during the Vietnam War. Before leaving Hanoi I would recommend you see a performance at the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater. At only US\$4 a ticket you will be enchanted by both the puppets and the traditional Vietnamese orchestral music. If you have time, visit the Museum of Ethnology, the Temple of Literature and the Military History Museum and try to fit in one of the Hoa Sua restaurants. These are training restaurants for disadvantaged youth who will shower

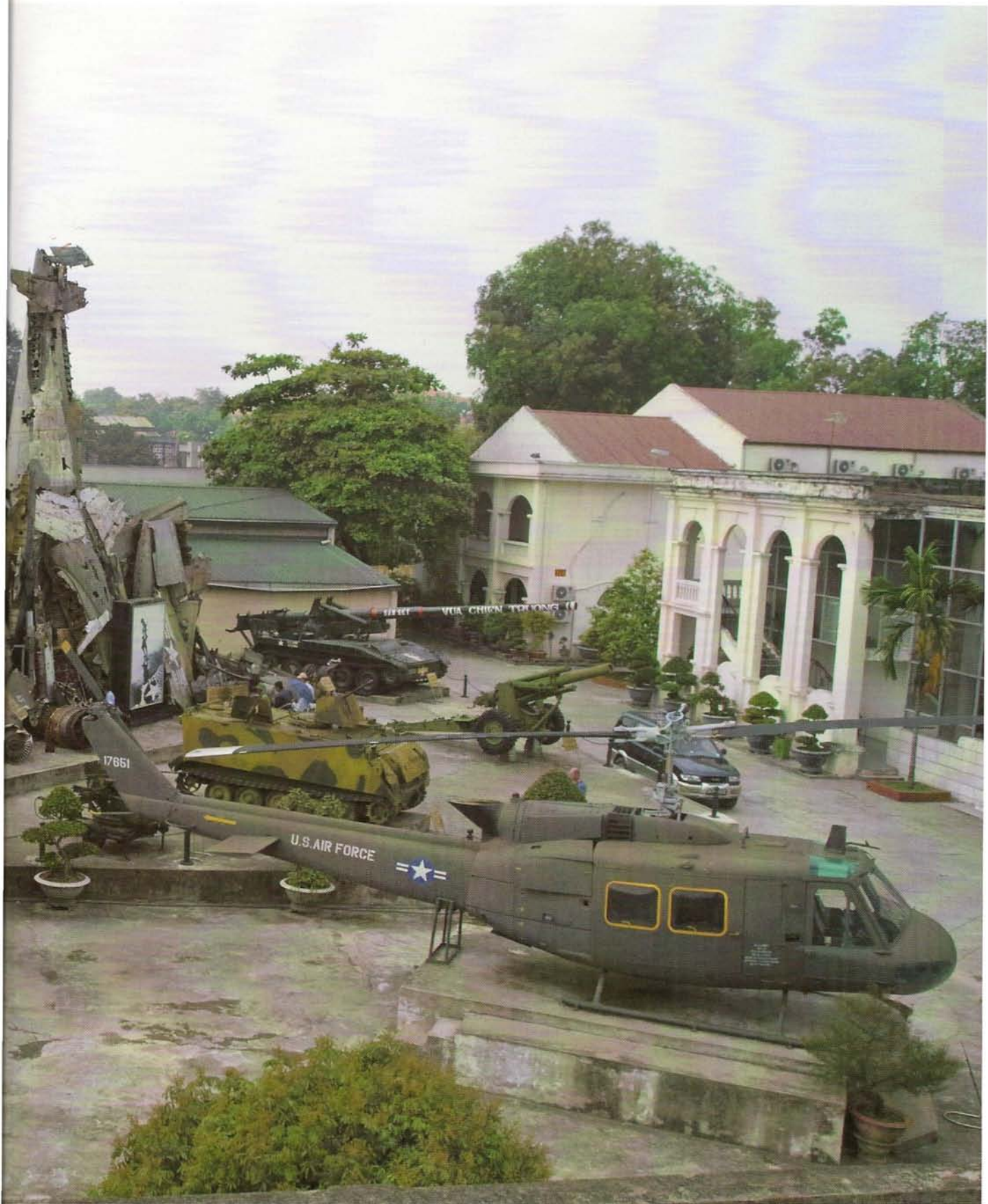
you with attention and smiles as they serve an excellent three-course continental or Vietnamese meal for US\$12. Hoa Sua's alternative job program offers a clear sign that Vietnam is moving away from its historic Chinese cultural period when passing the imperial Mandarin exams was once the only means for advancement.

In part, thanks to Catherine Deneuve and the movie *Indochine*, the UNESCO heritage listed Halong Bay is a must-see in Vietnam. *Ha long* translates literally as "where the dragon descends into the sea," and it is easy to imagine some magical creature swishing its tail and plunging into the sea. We went by

Nam Hai Resort Pool







Hanoi Military Museum



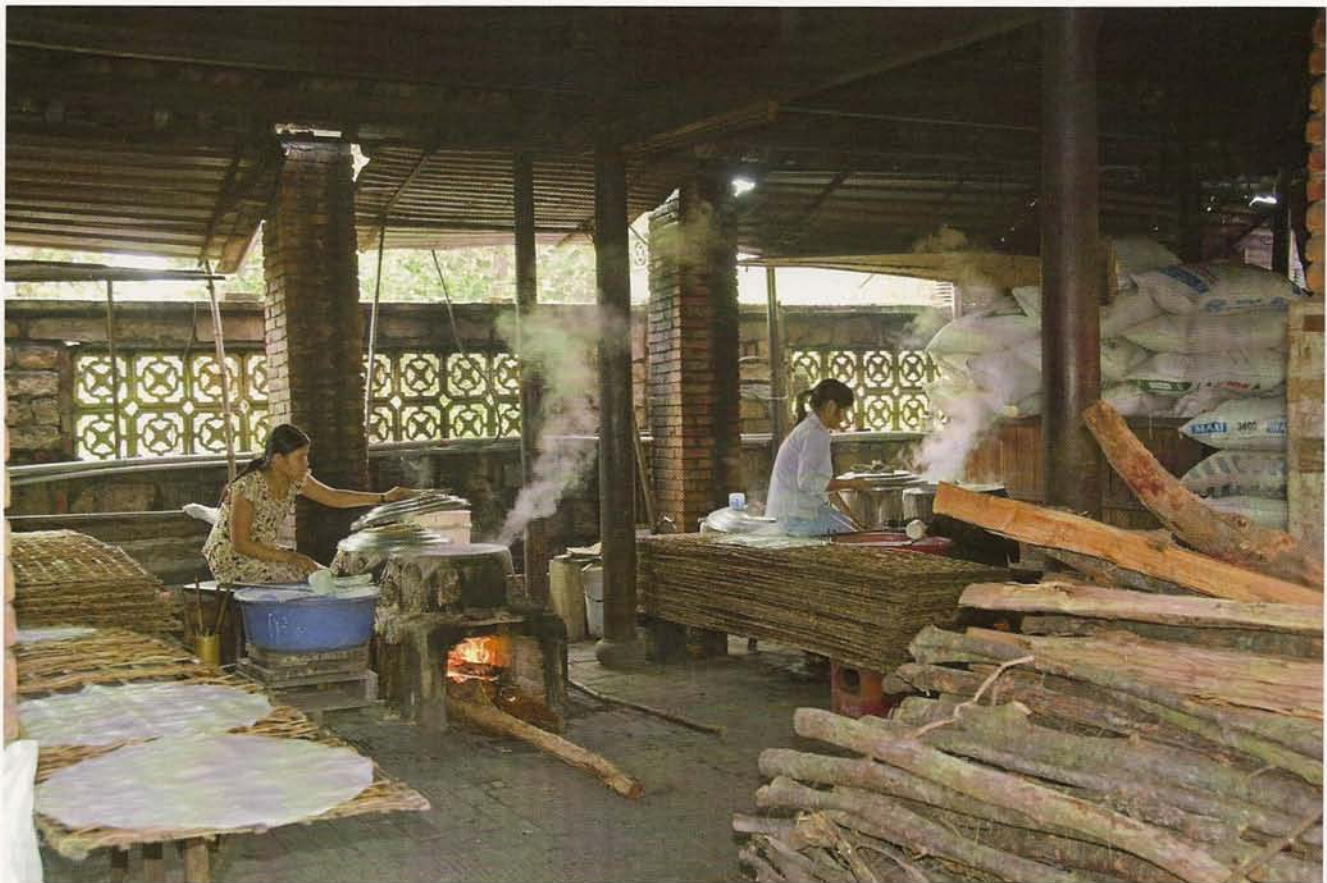
Ho Chi Minh Main Market



Ho Chi Minh City Street



Pho drying in the garden of the Hoi An Ancient House



The pho bakery at the Hoi An Ancient House



Halong Bay Cave



Hanoi Water Puppets



Hanoi Market at night

coach from Hanoi and spent the night aboard an exotic looking junk. There may be more than 3,000 islands with dramatic limestone formations and caves in Halong Bay but tourists are restricted to a very small area. Although UNESCO recognized Ha Long Bay as a World Natural Heritage Area in 1994, and the local provincial government established the Ha Long Bay Management Department in 1995, tourism is nonetheless taking its toll on the Bay. I would caution anybody that if you imagine mooring alone amid pristine beauty, the reality may be that it will feel more like a busy marina. Sadly, I had to choose not to swim after I saw the amount of sewerage and rubbish floating in the water, and regrettably I see no sign that this problem is being addressed. I recommend you try to stay in Halong Bay long enough to sail further away from the one-night tourist junks.

Next day from Danang airport we drove 30 kilometers south to the riverside town of Hoi An. In 1999, UNESCO declared the old town a World Heritage site. It is a well-preserved example of a Southeast Asian trading port of the 15th to 19th centuries, whose buildings display a unique blend of local and foreign influences. For centuries Hoi An's wharf was crowded with Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese sailing ships. Because the town was hardly touched by the Vietnam War (even though it was attacked during the Tet Offensive), hundreds of

historically and architecturally important structures are being restored. Walking around you will notice that many of Hoi An's houses have round pieces of wood with an *am* and *duong* symbol surrounded by a spiral design over the doorway. These watchful eyes (*mat cua*) protect the residents. Hoi An is also making a name for itself today as the city of tailors and so a popular tourist pastime is to have new clothes hand made at a fraction of the cost back home. I avoided the more well known tailors in favor of Sao, a smaller tailor on the main street who did detailed hand

Ho Chi Minh Father and Daughter





Hwe Pagoda

stitching and listened well to what I needed.

Our hotel, the Ancient House, was within walking distance of all the highlights. But one of the best highlights was a feature in the hotel: a large, tropical pool surrounded by bougainvillea and hibiscus that we fell into at the end of each day of sightseeing and shopping. At the hotel there is a small family bakery where five generations have made *pho*, a traditional rice noodle. Early one morning we watched the rice being ground, boiled, and rolled into large discs, rather like thin, translucent pizzas, before being dried indoors on dome shaped wooden racks over hot coals or, weather permitting, outdoors on large racks. About 80 percent of Hoi An restaurants order their *pho* from here.

One day we rented a large van and driver for only US\$80 for the entire day and, with four friends, visited Hwe. The highlights of this ancient capital are the moated Citadel (Kinh Thankh) and the Thien Mu Pagoda. The drive over the mountain range though proved to be our favorite part of the trip. The rural quiet nature of the mountains made us feel we were seeing everyday Vietnamese life without the superficial layer of tourism.

Back at Hoi An we managed to fit in a trip to the Red Bridge Restaurant, well-known for its cooking school, which is very picturesque especially when arrived at by boat. We frequented the Nan Long Restaurant where we sat outside by the river eating succulent, freshly caught crabs. The following day I relaxed at an excellent spa just a couple of blocks from our hotel where a four-hour beauty treatment with quality product cost less than a dinner in Seoul. That evening we indulged ourselves at the Nam Hai resort (wearing our newly tailored clothes of course) and the next morning flew to Ho Chi Minh City or as the locals say, Saigon. When a local was asked why Saigon is the preferred name, the answer was simple enough; it's easier to say.

Saigon is where the new capitalism is most apparent and Saigon inhabitants want to claim their share of the modern consumerism. There are several modes of transport by which to navigate the city center: by foot, by pedal powered cycles, by the ubiquitous, unlicensed Honda Oms (motorbikes), or ever present taxis (just remember to take the taxis with green lettering as they are government run and cost a tenth of the price of privately owned/operated taxis.) The first stop for many tourists is the huge central market, Cho Ben Thanh. The main entrance with its belfry and clock is a symbol of Saigon and inside even the most jaded consumer will find themselves back in shopping mode because of the huge range of goods at bargain prices.

For us the highlight of Saigon was found outside the city on a full day tour of the Mekong Delta. Known as Vietnam's bread basket, the Mekong Delta is a low and uncluttered lush green



Hoi An Fisherman

landscape with meandering rivers, pagodas, and monkey bridges (so-called because they resemble the high narrow platform above a deck or in an engine room or boiler room on a ship.) Locals express best what this area is like with the phrase, "*co bay thang canh*," meaning the "land is so large that the cranes can stretch their wings as they fly." This was a relaxing change from the noise and crush of Saigon. But even here, the Cae Be floating market was definitely bustling and the river lifestyle seems to be anything but languid.

In this region is My Tho where the truly adventurous can try the local specialty, snake. You can watch as the gallbladder is extracted from the freshly-killed snake and mixed with blood and whisky to drink as an aphrodisiac. The snake is then chopped up and stir fried with curry which was rather uninteresting and tasteless. For some a must see excursion from Saigon is the Cu Chi tunnels but I decided this was for the younger and more slightly built. Although there is a Cu Chi history museum that describes the tunnels we were told that it is all in Vietnamese so instead we hired a car for the day and visited the numerous and fascinating pagodas of Saigon.

During our excursion, we lunched at Pho 24 (a franchise found all over Saigon) across from the Sheraton and in the heart of what used to be the French Quarter. No two restaurants make *pho* the same way. At Pho 24 they add flank, brisket, tripe, fresh basil leaves, chilies, lime juice, hoison sauce and a little sriracha (Thai hot chili) sauce. Accompanied by soursop—a spiny, yellow-green fruit with tart, edible pulp—(think sour apple smoothie), this was a healthy and vibrant tasting lunch. Dinner that evening in the old French Quarter was our farewell to Vietnam. I left with the distinct impression that Vietnam is now so firmly engaged in tourism that in five years many of this trip's sights and experiences will no longer be available. Perhaps Vietnam is a destination best visited now to really enjoy its uniqueness. **A**