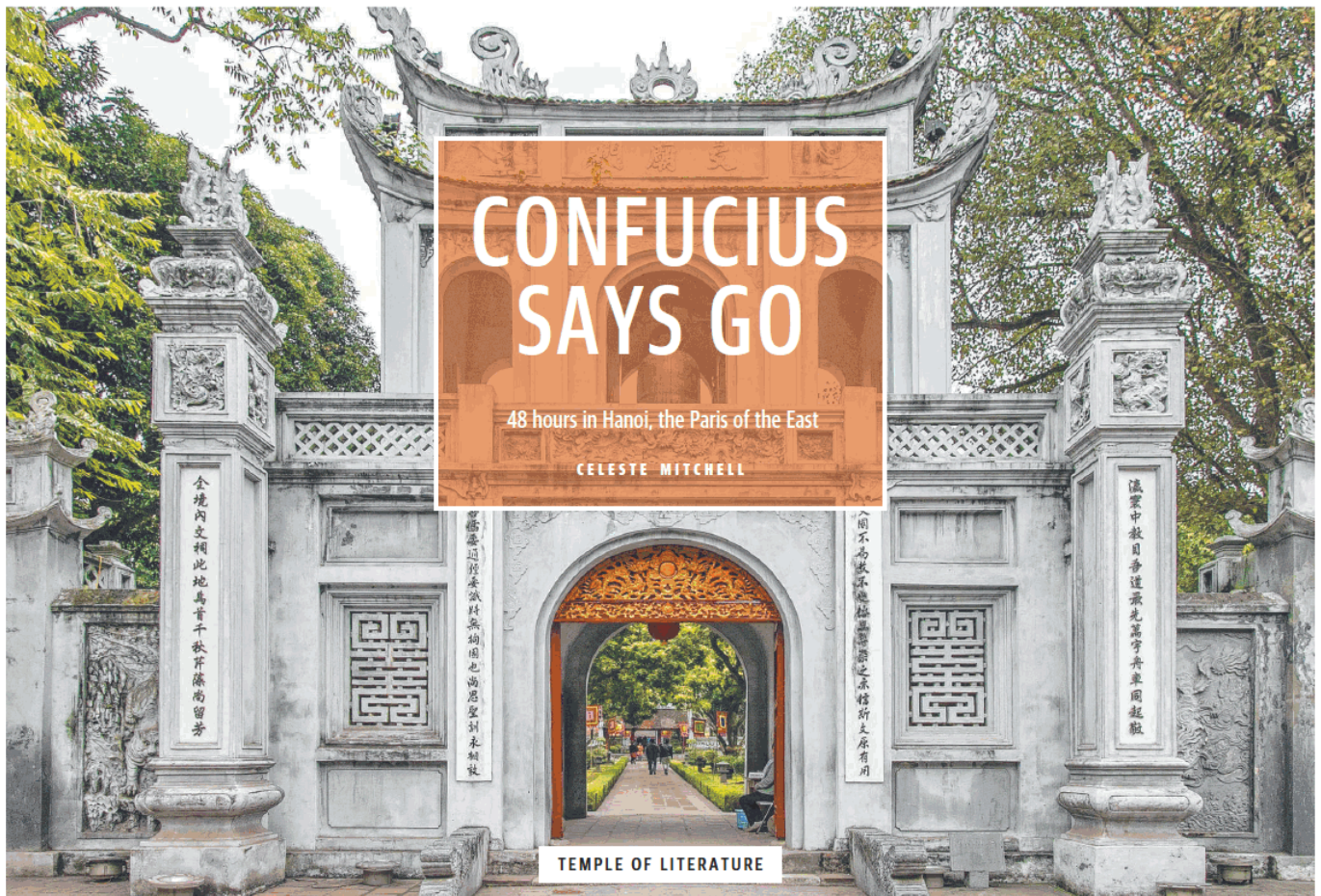


DESTINATION ♦ VIETNAM



Is there any better feeling than stepping out into a new city and falling immediately in love? Paris might be renowned for romance but the “Paris of the East”, Hanoi, had me at hello.

The city is alive; breathing through tree-lined lungs. Trees battle with power lines and twist their way through French colonial buildings, adorning crumbling facades with their gnarled trunks and shading the bitumen below.

It rains in August. Constantly. The damp, the wet, cooling what would otherwise surely be an oppressive heat. But nobody skips a beat; plastic ponchos fly past – clear, red, green. And for what appears at first glance to be a cacophony of chaos, this city of seven million people – and five million motorbikes – ebbs and flows like the Red River runs to the Delta.

It’s a lot to take in over just two days, but armed with a plan you can ensure you take a nice big bite of Vietnam’s charming capital in the north. And once you’ve tasted Hanoi, the city won’t soon be forgotten.

DAY 1 AM

TAKE A CYCLO TOUR

No matter where you stay in Hanoi, all roads lead to the Old Quarter, Hanoi’s low-line historical heart.

It’s one of the most densely populated pockets of the city and life here plays out in much the same manner it has since it was established in 1010. Hanoi is one of the oldest cities in Southeast Asia and while over the years it’s been occupied by the French and the Japanese, it’s been the capital of a reunified Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War.

For all the comings and goings,

there’s a sense of calm as I roll through the Old Quarter in the front of a cyclo – a three-wheeled taxi bike.

We take in streets organised and named by the trade its merchants ply – Hang Bac (silver), Hang Ma (paper), Hang Go (wood) as locals cycle and barter and shop. New and exotic fragrances tug at my nostrils as each street transforms into a smorgasbord for the senses. Here on the corner, women sell baskets full of fresh rice noodles, cut off in chunks with scissors and wrapped in banana leaves. There a crowd huddles, crouched on baby-sized stools slurping bowls full of noodle soup.

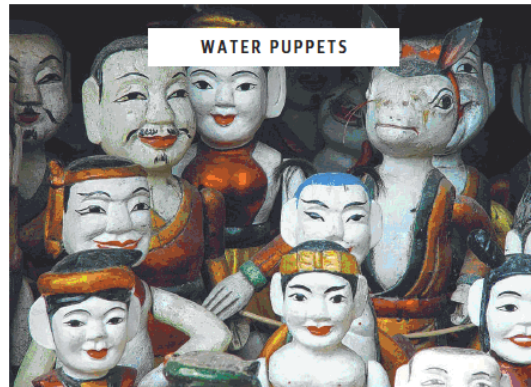
Buying Ingredients is a twice-daily ritual because kitchens in the Old Quarter are not equipped to store more food than what is immediately required. Here, multiple families share cramped living space, often with a shopfront facade that might act as a hairdresser by day and restaurant by night.

I feel a pang of guilt for my conical hat-wearing driver, coated in his poncho, as he battles with the rain and potholed streets while I snap photos in front, but everywhere I look, Hanoians are enjoying life. It’s a young population – more than 60 per cent of Vietnamese people are under the age of 30 – gathering on the sidewalks, drinking coffee and lemon tea. They’re relaxed; they’re happy.

“They feel good with what they have,” guide David says as I join him after the ride.

HIT THE MARKETS

You can’t experience the soul of Hanoi without wandering its markets and laneways, protected from the midday deluge by a rainbow of tarpaulins strung below the tangle of



The Temple of Literature was built in 1070; don’t miss a water puppet show; try a Charlie Chaplin cocktail at Hotel Metropole’s Bamboo Bar; markets are the city’s soul.

PICTURES: ISTOCK, SOFITELE

power lines; past the woman selling bun oc (small soup), past bowls of colourful gelatinous che thap cam (mixed sweet soup), past the man wearing a green camo-print onesie singing karaoke into a rose-gold microphone, and ending with a plate piled high with banh tom – sweet potato fritters topped with a crispy prawn. Street food is everywhere and everything in Hanoi.

Meanwhile, inside the three-storey Dong Xuan Market I find everything from butter-roasted coffee and jackfruit chips on the ground floor, to clothing, fabric and blinds upstairs. Exiting through a food hall, past dried squid and shrimp of varying strengths and price tags, I’m spat back out onto the street where women

balance baskets piled high with longan, turtles and toads wriggle in cages next to headless fish, and a kettle whistles on an old metal drum.

PM SEE A PUPPET SHOW

The fluid movements of the dan bau (monochord) player, seated in the wings above the watery stage are as mesmerising as the instrument itself – a dance of delicate hand movements, lightly plucking and moving along a single string. Her hair is rolled into a perfect crown, her posture light and elegant. Next to her, in robes of violet and boysenberry, musicians play drums and a two-stringed fiddle.

On the opposite side of the stage,

two women masterfully control 16-chord zithers – all in harmony – as the most charming puppet show plays out below.

This is the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre, staging a tradition of Northern Vietnam that dates back to the 11th century. Elaborately carved wooden puppets – villagers, buffalo, and holy animals – are manoeuvred across and through the water from behind a bamboo curtain by talented puppeteers. It’s impossible not to feel joy watching the wooden boy playing his flute or the farmers chasing frogs through Imaginary fields.

DINNER AT LY CLUB

The romantic white facade of the 19th-century colonial townhouse peeks out between smotherings of vines, and the smell of lemongrass swarms my senses as I step through the French doors of the Ly Club. My dining companions and I sink into rose velvet, high-back chairs and peruse the extensive wine list. There’s an air of elegance in this dining room, with soaring ceilings and antiques dating back to the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225). The menu is French-Vietnamese fine dining with dishes like ginkgo nut soup and steamed snowfish two of the signatures.

NIGHTCAP AT BAMBOO BAR

Of all the iconic buildings in Hanoi – the Opera House, the Presidential Palace – the Hotel Metropole stands out as one of its most refined. A hotel since 1901, its guest list is as storied as the history of Hanoi over the past century and is reflected in the cocktail list. In the Bamboo Bar beside the pool, order a Charlie Chaplin (gin, apricot brandy and lime juice) – the comic actor honeymooned here – try

DESTINATION ♦ VIETNAM



BAMBOO BAR



MARKET FARE

a margarita given a Hanoi twist with banana flower syrup and grapefruit juice, or stick with a rosé (frozen rosé).

DAY 2

AM VISIT THE UNESCO-LISTED LITERATURE TEMPLE

In stark contrast to the designer flagships sprouting on Trang Tien St, stepping through the gates of Van Mieu Quoc Tu Giam – the Temple of Literature and Imperial Academy – is to enter another world.

Built in 1070 in dedication to Confucius, it's considered the first university of Vietnam. Lush green gardens and perfectly preened hedges frame five wide courtyards, pagodas and a large square pond;

popular with students who come for graduation photos or attempt to touch the heads of the UNESCO-listed, tortoise stone steles for good luck before exams (the steles are now protected by a barricade and, sometimes, guards). The steles are inscribed with the names of doctors who passed the difficult court examinations between 1442 and 1779.

At the altar of Confucius inside the Dai Thanh temple, sweets, green tea and the gnarled yellow "Buddha's hands" – a type of citrus fruit – are left as offerings amongst flickering tea lights.

LUNCH AT MADAME HIEN

Step through the doors of this beautifully preserved, century-old

Hanoi villa and sit down to the flavours of the city's most famous street food dishes, given an elegant French twist by chef Didier Corlu.

Madame Hien is a homage to his Vietnamese wife's grandmother's cooking and a progressive lunch of fresh and fried spring rolls followed by banana flower chicken salad, crispy prawns, stir-fried pork with red onion, and garlic-y baby bok choy is a feast for the senses as much for the stomach.

PM SEEK OUT EGG COFFEE

The man behind the cash register inside Cafe Giang knows first-hand the perfect recipe for Hanoi's famous egg coffee – aka the Vietnamese

cappuccino. His father was a bartender at Hotel Metropole in a time when fresh milk was scarce and he started experimenting with egg yolk to achieve the creamy, silky consistency his patrons craved. The yolks are beaten with sugar and mixed with Robusta coffee and condensed milk to create the dessert-like drink.

"People have started doing it elsewhere in the country, but locals still believe this one tastes the best," guide David explains as I swirl my spoon through the thick, sweet brew. Like many things I've experienced in Hanoi, once is never quite enough.

THE WRITER TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF VIETNAM AIRLINES

ESCAPE ROUTE

HANOI

GETTING THERE

Board mid-afternoon and you can be on the streets slurping noodles by 9pm in Hanoi. National carrier Vietnam Airlines flies direct to Hanoi from Sydney on Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners. vietnamairlines.com

STAYING THERE

The Mela Hanoi, refurbished in 2016, is just a few blocks from the French Quarter and in walking distance to the Temple of Literature and the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre. Rooms start from \$284 a night. mela.com



FOR MORE VIETNAM INSIGHTS, SEE ESCAPE.COM.AU



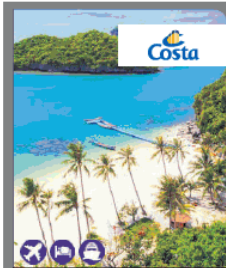
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- Oceanview upgrade from \$99pp. Balcony upgrade from \$199pp. Add a 9 night China/Stay/Tour from \$699pp!

Exclusive price from **\$1,899pp**

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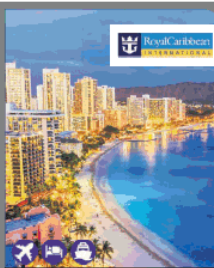
CIRCLE JAPAN CRUISE

DIAMOND PRINCESS
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- 9 night cruise from Tokyo (Yokohama) visiting Ishinomaki, Hakodate, Maizuru, Busan, cruise Kanmon Straits to Hiroshima and Tokyo (Yokohama)
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Exclusive price from **\$2,799pp**

Web Cruise Ref: RCIOV1704



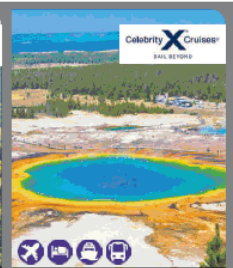
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