BAZAAR ESCAPE

EDITED BY CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER

SPIRIT *of the Orient*

From Vietnam to Laos, through Thailand and Indonesia, *Bazaar* uncovers hidden beach hangouts and stylish city retreats amid the colourful energy of South-east Asia

PHOTOGRAPH: DON McCULLIN

MARKET FORCES
Clockwise from above: dragon-fruit sellers in Hue. The market in Hoi An. A family travelling into the town. The busy waterfront in Nha Trang

In Hanoi's French Quarter, fin-de-siècle mansions shed layers of jade and turquoise paint in the heat. The Opera House, fancying itself to be in Paris, vies with the Metropole hotel for position of grande dame. Perhaps the latter wins. After all, this is where Noël Coward and Charlie Chaplin stayed. Plus, Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene penned novels here, sitting at desks beside Oriental screens and beneath wooden ceiling fans. 'At Hanoi,' wrote Maugham, 'I found nothing much to interest me.'

I find, on the other hand, much to interest me as we relax by the Metropole pool. We are served tropical-fruit kebabs, chocolates delicately flavoured with ginger, jasmine and green tea, and chilled flannels to cool us down. Nearby, two Western couples are in baby-adoption transit, and our children are checking their tarantulas, fortunately now lifeless and preserved in alcohol. Outside, motorbikes roar – often the wrong way down streets and over pavements – their women drivers sporting cloth face masks like dainty jockstraps. The bikes – often straddled alarmingly by entire families, and sometimes with a slaughtered pig strapped to the back – are a defining feature of Vietnam. In Hanoi alone, there are two and a half million motorbikes for a city of six million people.

After tea, we dodge traffic, weaving through the thronging lanes of the Old Quarter. 'We spend three days at university learning how to help tourists cross roads,' says our Hanoi guide, Anh. We sidestep the pole carriers selling baskets of dragon fruit and custard apples. The politics may be Communism, but the religion here is consumerism; everyone is buying and selling something. Girls proffer conical bamboo hats for a quick sale. 'Don't forget me,' they implore.

More likely, I'll remember the mediaeval street of traditional medicine shops, where I pick up rice-wine bottles containing cobras and scorpions, for rheumatism, lumbago, or 'sweat of limbs', or the road in which the only thing to buy is tin votive boxes for sending the dead happily on their way. Meanwhile, we try not to trip over the living: girls squatting on their haunches beside panniers of dried shrimps; men sitting outside shops and restaurants as companions remove their grey hairs with tweezers.

It's easy to spend all day in the street, haggling and being transfixed by daily life – more my thing than the embalmed yellowing remains of former leader 'Uncle Ho' in the mausoleum. But we savour the exquisite 11th-century Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first university and Confucian temple, with its clay 'shoe-top' roof tiles, red-lacquer pillars and rat and buffalo topiary. Afterwards, we squat on small plastic chairs on the pavement to eat pho, a delicious beef noodle broth.

In Hue, our next destination, our street dish of choice is red banana blossom flowers with shrimp, mint and peanut salad. Hue was once the imperial capital and is now a Unesco World Heritage Site. Most of the Imperial City was destroyed in the Vietnam War. It fell to the north Vietnamese in the vicious 1968 Tet Offensive. Ask anyone about the past and the answer is always the same: 'We don't forget but we don't look back. We think of the future.' It is amazing how Vietnam has transformed itself from bullet-ridden hellhole into luxury tourist destination.

We stay at La Résidence Hotel, an erstwhile annex to the former French governor's home on the banks of the Perfume River. There's no Facebook – it's blocked by the government – so I watch our children go through cold turkey, until a friendly local reveals the code-breaker and they slide, once more, into active addiction.

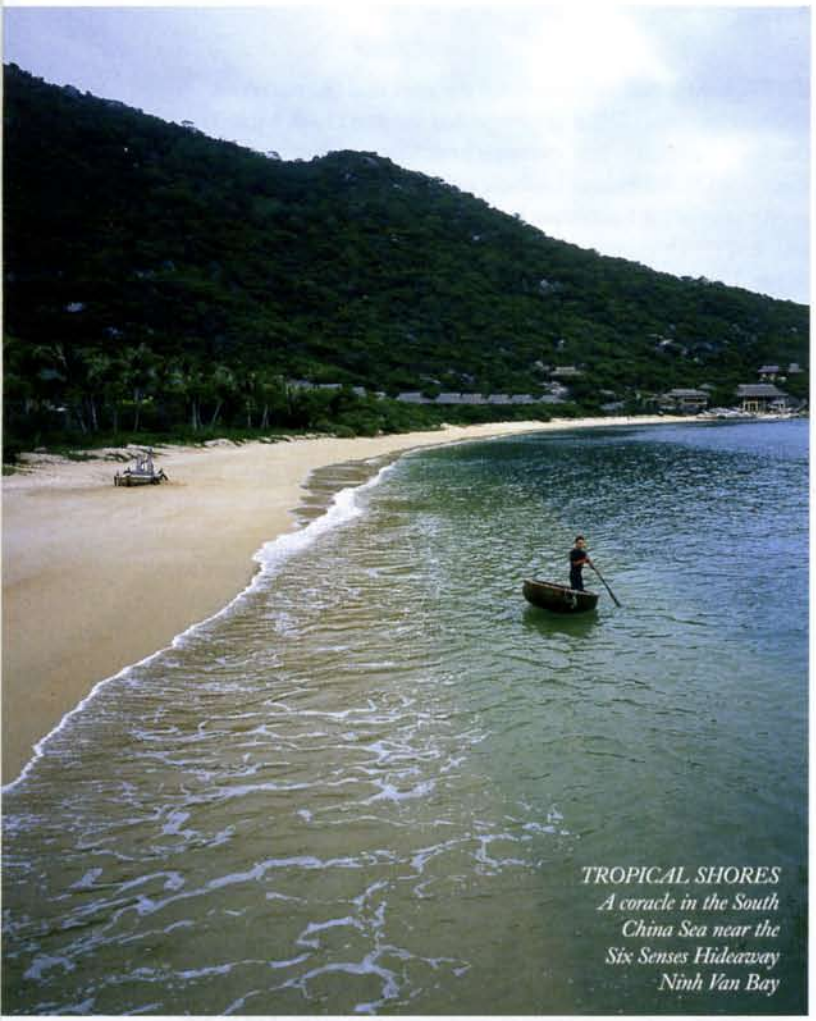
Afterwards, we cross the river on a dragon boat, its prow the mythical creature's head painted a vivid red and yellow. We pass sampans and shrines to the holy mother of the river. It is a poetic landscape, with the Truong Son mountains a majestic backdrop.

Our new guide Huy drops exotic names such as Emperor Minh Mang, and Emperor Tu Doc, who was kept busy with more than 100 concubines. Huy takes us to the bullet-pocked gates of the Citadel, to tombs and palaces flanked by marble statues of Mandarin warriors and pavilions and pagodas. There are bonsai trees in humungous Ming vases, guarded at night by men with AK-47s. The air is thick with frangipani, history and the noise of cicadas. We sit in the shade of banana-trees and drink sweet juice from coconut husks to cool our sun-baked bodies.

The next day, it takes us nearly three hours to drive 90 miles past fluorescent-green paddy fields and rice drying on the tarmac. Then we travel along winding mountain roads until we reach the Nam Hai resort near Hoi An. This is honeymoon central. There are Aman-style villas with chic contemporary Asian decor, some with private infinity pools edging onto the golden China Beach and a picture-perfect sparkling sea. The staff model the natural perma-smiles of many Vietnamese. It's a relief to relax after so much activity. Phuong, our butler, does our packing, serves us steamed fish in banana leaves, and even accompanies us to some of the hundreds of tailors and shoemaking shops in Hoi An. Savile Row and Lobb's these are not. Welcome instead to Yaly, a Fifties-style emporium with miles of fabrics and ceiling fans that redistribute the heat. There are mannequins dressed in time-warp business suits, and catalogues with magazine pictures of clothes to copy – from as little as £40 for a silk party dress, including material.

> We cross the Perfume River on a dragon boat, its prow the mythical creature's head painted a vivid red and yellow. We pass sampans and shrines to the holy mother of the river. It is a poetic landscape

Hoi An, another Unesco World Heritage Site, was untouched by conflict. There are no modern buildings in the town, just ochre-painted houses and narrow roads with bougainvillea-trees and Chinese temples. We visit 18th-century merchants' houses with crab-shelled roofs, mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, and Japanese-style beams. In one house, where the eighth generation of a family live in the same single room as their forebears, we drink lotus-flavoured green tea out of tiny 'egg' cups. Afterwards, we sit on the Cargo Club restaurant terrace overlooking the canal under parasols and Chinese silk lanterns of pink, yellow and apricot. We dine on delicate rice-flour dumplings and sesame-encrusted tuna.



TROPICAL SHORES
A coracle in the South China Sea near the Six Senses Hideaway Ninh Van Bay

From there, it's an hour by plane, another hour by car, and then 20 minutes turning green in a speedboat before we arrive at the Six Senses Hideaway at Ninh Van Bay, an area of breathtaking natural beauty with tropical vegetation, elephantine boulders and shores fringed by coral reefs. It's a peninsula that is accessible only by boat and feels like an island. We stay in a beachfront villa, bathe in cinnamon-scented waters in a wooden bathtub, and take alfresco showers with curious geckos. A hotel note requests that we take our aerosols, plastic and batteries with us when we leave.

Quaintly, time in this *Robinson Crusoe*-meets-Prada eco-resort is set an hour ahead of Hanoi, the better to enjoy the daylight. We cycle everywhere. We also take a local boat to a lobster farm with a floating shrine offering the gods yellow chrysanthemums, watermelon and incense. A fisherman dives into a pool and re-emerges with a glistening crustacean. Afterwards, we sail to a deserted beach, where our staff serve barbecued lobster, squid and crab on a table laid with linen.

There's Christian Louboutin-standard luxury, too. We find it later, when we reach Ho Chi Minh City – which everyone still calls Saigon – at the Park Hyatt, with its five-star service and Michelin-standard restaurant. It's a city selling French-designed linens, embroidery and fine silk clothes, where Vietnamese contemporary art goes for international prices. Perhaps the city has gone full circle and once again fancies itself to be Paris. □

A 14-night itinerary in Vietnam costs from £2,440 a person, including domestic flights, with Scott Dunn (020 8682 5400; www.scottdunn.com). Flights from Heathrow to Hanoi or Saigon cost from £735 a person with Thai Airways (0844 561 0911; www.thaiair.com).

DREAM TIME
A bedroom at the Six Senses Hideaway Ninh Van Bay

VIETNAM *ESSENTIALS*

Where to stay

Built in 1901, the **Metropole** (+84 43 826 6919; www.sofitel.com) in Hanoi offers French-colonial elegance in the old wing and, after extensive renovations, a zingy new wing – virtually a separate hotel in character. Try Le Spa for a body wrap using clay, rice-bran and bamboo-shoot extracts, and a green-tea and bamboo-shoot facial. **La Résidence** (+84 054 383 7475; www.la-residence-hue.com), on the banks of the Perfume River in Hue, is an original 1930s house with art deco-style furniture and fixtures, as well as two comfortable modern wings. There's also a 30-metre saltwater pool and seven spa treatment rooms. The **Nam Hai** (+84 510 394 0000; www.ghmhotels.com) in Hoi An combines sleek design with stunning views. Imagine sunken baths, mood lighting and beds on raised teak platforms. The resort also offers what is possibly Vietnam's best hotel gift shop. With its French-colonial-inspired decor and 24-hour butler service on every floor, the **Park Hyatt** (+84 83 824 1234; www.saigon.park.hyatt.com) in Saigon makes an unbeatable oasis. The **Six Senses Hideaway** (+84 58 372 8222; www.sixsenses.com) is located in the breathtaking Ninh Van Bay, which just about outweighs the communication problems and sometimes rustic service. But the new manager promises great things.

Dine

...at the restaurant of South-east Asian culinary TV star **Bobby Chinn** (+84 43 719 2460; www.bobbychinn.com) in Hanoi's Tay Ho district, and sample global cuisine like blackened barramundi on braised banana blossom with turmeric balsamic vinegar. Try the **Cargo Club** (+84 510 391 1227; www.cargo-hoian.com) restaurant overlooking the canal for 'white roses' (rice-flower dumplings) and sesame-encrusted red tuna with coconut lime wasabi sauce.

Visit

...**Yaly** (+84 510 391 4995; www.yalycouture.com) in Hoi An and choose from rolls of fabric to have clothes made up in hours.

Shop

Gaya (+84 8925 1495; www.gayavietnam.com) is a designer emporium with a selection of homeware, furniture and clothing, including clothes from the Cambodian-born, French-raised Romyda Keth. **Catherine Denoual Maison** (+84 3823 9394; www.catherinedenoual.com) in Ho Chi Minh stocks French-style table- and bedlinen from French designer Denoual. **The Apricot Gallery** (+84 43 828 8965; www.apricotgallery.com) is great for Vietnamese art.