



HISTORIC HANOI

THERE ARE HELPINGS OF HERITAGE TO BE DISCOVERED OFF
HANOI'S CROWDED MAIN BOULEVARDS.

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I sat nervously in the backseat as the taxi driver manically weaved through Hanoi's congested streets. I stared out of the window in horror as we narrowly missed passing motorcyclists and came within inches of hitting wide-eyed pedestrians.

Vietnam has the most motorcycles of any country per capita in the world and with the sheer number of vehicles on the road, it shows. When the taxi pulled up to my hotel, in Hanoi's historic Hoan Kiem Lake district, I vowed that I would avoid motorized vehicles for the rest of my time in the city.

Luckily the compact Old Quarter is the perfect place to stroll around and wile away the days. With its street side shopping, French-colonial architecture and war-related museums the main attractions of Hanoi's historic Old Quarter are best seen on foot.

My first morning in the city I ventured toward the picturesque Hoan Kiem Lake for a lakeside breakfast. As I waited to cross the street, I realized that, in Hanoi, walking might just be more hazardous than driving.

As the traffic steadily streamed down the road I watched in bewilderment as locals walked right into oncoming traffic without hesitation. They sauntered confidently to the other side of the road, as vehicles glided past them as if they were protected by an invisible shield.

After 10 minutes of waiting I latched onto an elderly



Vietnamese man. Trailing an inch behind him, I mimicked his every movement and tried my best to ignore the dozens of motorcycles speeding toward me. Crossing the street in Hanoi was no easy feat, but I made it to the other side unscathed.

In contrast to the traffic that buzzes around the lake's ring road, Hoan Kiem Lake was surprisingly tranquil. Its small pagoda floating in the center of the lake and the men and women doing their morning tai chi created an unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful setting.

At a nearby bakery, I ordered

a cup of Vietnamese coffee (traditionally prepared with a small metal French drip filter and a generous layer of sweetened condensed milk), ordered a croissant and settled in on a bench overlooking the lake.

It dawned on me that my very French-style breakfast was no coincidence; the pastry and drip coffee were just two remnants from Vietnam's former rulers.

The French colonized Hanoi in the 1800s and were ousted once and for all by the Viet Minh in 1954. However,

their cultural influence still looms large in Hanoi. During my brief time in the city it was impossible not to notice that much of Hanoi, from its architecture to its cuisine,

had a French touch.

Every morning I saw Vietnamese women peddling basketfuls of freshly baked baguettes. These baguettes are commonly used to make *bánh mì*, a Vietnamese sandwich layered with meat, cucumber, cilantro and chilies. The abundance of cafes and bakeries that line the streets, emitting the sweet scents of authentic French pastries, are yet another obvious reminder of the country's former colonizers.

But the French influence is most notably apparent in Hanoi's distinct architecture. Around the city French-colonial mansions sit alongside modest and absurdly narrow tubular houses that are common in Hanoi.

PRESERVING TRADITION

For a city that is over 1,000 years old, Hanoi's history is rooted much deeper than France's relatively brief sojourn in the city. Part of what drew me to the Old Quarter was its varied, and well preserved, historical relics.

Walking around the area's narrow and mazelike streets it was hard to imagine that this now bustling metropolis dates back to the 13th century. Back then the Old Quarter consisted of roughly 36 streets that radiated around the former king's palace. As a city of commerce, each street





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was dedicated to a specific product or trade and consisted of virtually identical businesses and shop fronts. Centuries later this practice is still largely in place. Many of the 36 streets still boast their original names and remain dedicated to selling specific wares. Hang Bac is lined with silver and jewelry shops. Hang Gai boasts world-famous silk stalls. While Hang Dau is packed with shoe stores and cobblers. Despite the presence of motorbikes, 5-star hotels and chic cafes, much of the Old Quarter feels like it operates in much the same way as it has for the past century. Men still lazily pedal rickshaws down the streets, while women balance heavy loads of fruit on their shoulders with traditional carrying poles. Women crouch on street corners, charring meat skewers over hot

coals and diligently fanning the smoking hunks of meat. In many restaurants and food stalls, pho simmers in large vats. The smell of its herb-infused broth wafting down the alleyways of the Old Quarter.

BATTLE WOUNDS

Even with Hanoi's long and rich history, it is Vietnam's American War that lures many visitors to the city. The brutal war lasted from 1955 until 1975 and is one of the most complex aspects of Hanoi's history.

In contemporary Hanoi, which was the capital of Northern Vietnam during the war, the war is constantly eluded to through its sobering museums and touristy trinkets. It's no surprise that Hanoi's savvy vendors were quick to capitalize on the war. To this day tourist shops sell screen prints of old nationalist propaganda posters, hawkers roam the streets with displays of "authentic" Zippo lighters supposedly left behind by American soldiers, and roadside stalls sell t-shirts

featuring the stoic face of nationalist leader and icon, Ho Chi Minh. Located just outside of the Old Quarter is Hoa Lo Prison, also known as the Hanoi Hilton, a somber reminder of Hanoi's dark past. The infamous prison was built by the French 1896 and originally housed political prisoners fighting for Vietnam's independence. During the American War it was used to imprison American prisoners of war, who were subjected to inhumane living conditions. From the French colonization to the American War, history emanates from every corner of contemporary Hanoi. As I learned during my time in Hanoi, the city's history is extensive and complex and, at times, incomprehensible. However, everything the city has endured for the past 1,000 years has sculpted Hanoi into the culturally rich and endlessly fascinating city it is today. 

IF YOU GO

Take in a water puppet show: This traditional performance dates back to the 11th century and is a must-see show for cultural enthusiasts.

Visit the Temple of Literature: Dating back to the 11th century, the stunning grounds are dotted with ornate temples and houses the oldest university in

Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum: The mausoleum contains the embalmed body of nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh, which is eerily displayed in a translucent case.

Take a side trip to Ha Long Bay: Arrange an overnight boat tour to nearby Ha Long Bay, famous for its stunning limestone islets and deserted beaches.