

BCD Travel Recommends: Hanoi

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Slow-paced, yet quick to charm



Vietnam's thousand-year-old capital is one of the most beguiling cities in Southeast Asia – a stylish, European-influenced metropolis with manicured lakeside promenades, tree-lined boulevards, ancient pagodas and French-colonial buildings painted in a peeling palette of jade, turquoise and burgundy.

Following years of rampant inflation, poverty and repression, the government introduced economic reform (*doi moi*) in 1986, allowing people to own their own businesses. Nearly sixty percent of the population in Vietnam was born after the war ended in 1975, and Hanoi feels like a city of teenagers.

Heading for the heart of Hanoi

Hoan Kiem Lake isn't Hanoi's biggest, or deepest, or even cleanest lake – but it is the spiritual center of the city.

It was from the depths of the lake, according to legend, that the 15th-century emperor Le Loi received a magic sword with which he routed Chinese occupiers. Hoan Kiem means Return of the Sword, commemorating the ceremonial moment when the emperor restored it to the lake. In one version of the legend, a golden turtle rose up to receive the sword, and giant turtles still inhabit the lake today.

Hoan Kiem is at its most crowded when few outsiders see it, at dawn. As the sky grows light, it reveals a throng of people in their underwear and pajamas, all around the banks, bending, twisting, punching the air, marching in place, flexing their torsos from side to side in a morning ritual of health. The lake's tree-lined shores are perfect for people-watching, meditating, strolling and enjoying a glass of coffee.



(A note on Vietnamese coffee: the classic preparation, *ca phe sua da*, means "iced milk coffee" and is made by mixing brewed black coffee with about a quarter to a half as much sweetened condensed milk and then pouring it over ice. In your Hanoi ramblings, you may come across coffee shops with the silhouette of a furry four-legged animal plastered on their windows; this means the establishment serves weasel coffee – that is, coffee brewed from beans that have been eaten and then regurgitated by a species of civet native to Vietnam. We are not making this up.)

BCD Travel Australia, contact us at: <http://express.bcdtravel.com.au>

SYD - P (+612) 9262 5511 **F** (+612) 9262 3166

MEL - P (+613)9595 6900 **F** (+613) 9595 6969

QLD - P (+617)3229 3511 **F** (+617) 3221 6604

Why (or rather how) did the tourist cross the road?



A visitor could be excused for believing, at first glance, that the motorbike to inhabitant ratio hovers at around nine to one. Hanoi's streets are filled to bursting with all sorts of wheeled contrivances – but because there are no apparent road rules, there is also no road rage. The secret to navigating the city streets on foot: go slow. Even when the bikes and cars seem poised to converge upon you, they won't. Walking slowly will allow them time to veer around you at the last possible second. It seems to work.

Don't miss...

Old Quarter

The Old Quarter, just north of Hoan Kiem Lake, is a delightful maze of narrow streets, each bearing the name of a traditional trade or profession, the area is famous for its small artisans and merchants, including many silk shops. Hanoi is a great place to shop – but be prepared to bargain hard. Silk items top the list, with oodles of shops and designer boutiques selling quality clothing and accessories. The local handicraft shops offer unique presents – lacquerware, ceramics and mother-of-pearl inlaid items.

Museum of Ethnology

Nguyen Van Huyen Street (Cau Giay, about 20 minutes from the center of Hanoi)

www.vme.org.vn

Dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritages of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups, the museum is a veritable treasure trove of clothing, jewels, weapons, household utensils, musical instruments and other artifacts. Helpful panels with texts, photographs and maps are posted in Vietnamese, English and French. The museum's outdoor section is a delight, with replicas of traditional dwellings, including an Ede long house, a Tay stilt house, a Hmong house roofed in pomu wood and a mud-walled Hanhi house.



Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum

5 Pho Ngoc Ha

Despite Ho Chi Minh's request to be cremated, he was embalmed and put on display. A visit to the mausoleum is a somber experience: guards are not terribly friendly and Uncle Ho looks a little yellow, but the quiet line that forms to view his body is a vision of respect. Ho's mausoleum is open only in the mornings, every day except Monday

and Friday.

Temple of Literature (Van Mieu)

Dedicated to Confucius and founded in 1070 by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong, the temple became Vietnam's first university – in 1076. Parts of the university date from this time period, although the large complex has undergone many changes over the centuries. The complex is in a tranquil park-like site in the heart of central Hanoi.

Than Long Water Puppet Theater

57B Dinh Tien Hoang (just north of Hoan Kiem Lake)

You won't regret a visit to this Hanoi institution. Water puppetry is a traditional Vietnamese art dating back to the 11th century; the puppeteers themselves hide behind a long screen and manipulate wooden puppets with bamboo rods while standing chest-deep in water, using the water's surface as a stage floor. Book your seats for the thrice-daily performances in advance, as shows tend to sell out (just drop by the theater in the afternoon on the day you want to attend).

A moveable feast

It's very easy to eat very well for not very much money at all in Hanoi, which is a street-food paradise. The rule of thumb seems to be that all that's necessary for a dining establishment is a campfire stove, a few plastic stools and a stretch of sidewalk to put them on. But if you're looking for more precise recommendations:



Fanny

48 Pho Le Thai To (Hoan Kiem Lake)

Facing the lake and resembling a belle époque creamery, Fanny's serves French-style ice cream with an artistic flourish. Try the young rice, ginger, cinnamon and coconut flavors.

Cha Ca La Vong

14 Pho Cha Ca (Old Quarter)

This bare-bones place, serving only one dish, has been in business for more than 100 years. Each table gets a tabletop charcoal brazier with a skillet in which sizzle crispy pieces of boneless freshwater fish coated with golden turmeric and pepper. You're given rice noodles, chili sauce, basil, cilantro, dill and scallions to add to the pan while the fish is cooking.

Banh Cuon Gia Truyen

14 Pho Hang Ga (Old Quarter)

You might have to squeeze your way into a chair during the morning rush, but once you're settled, you'll simply have your food put in front of you, no questions asked. Delicate *banh cuon* (silky steamed rice crepes filled with minced pork, mushrooms and ground shrimp), served hot off the screen on which they are steamed, are excellent.

Emperor

18 Pho Le Thanh Tong (French Quarter)

If your mood or the occasion calls for a gastronomic and financial splurge, you can't beat Emperor's exotic atmosphere and sophisticated contemporary Vietnamese food. Choose your setting: the lush courtyard, inside the traditional Asian wooden house, or up on the balcony.