

# How to Spend a Perfect Day in Hanoi

From zigzagging your way through a maze of lantern-strung alleyways to hole-in-the-wall eateries and chic boutiques, here are the best things to do in Hanoi.

By [Shawna Cohen](#) | May 12, 2025





In the Old Quarter, a street vendor carries fresh produce in twin baskets with a shoulder pole.

[Eirik Skarstein/Unsplash](#)



Vietnam's capital city vibrates with the roar of motorbikes, locals clinking iced coffees or Bia Hà Nội beers on tiny plastic stools and women hawking hot-pink dragon fruit and pomelos the size of volleyballs. It sounds overwhelming, but "it's organized chaos," says my Vespa guide, as we breeze by peaceful lakes and tree-lined boulevards that bring balance to the urban din. Shaped by Chinese and French colonial rule, Hanoi is where yin and yang meet joie de vivre — where centuries-old temples stand beside skyscrapers, and growing arts and cocktail scenes rival those in Paris and Singapore. It's a city where, despite its turbulent history, a go-with-the-flow sensibility courses through the streets like traffic.



On an islet in Hoàn Kiếm Lake, south of Ngọc Sơn Temple's isle, Turtle Tower makes for a perfect snapshot backdrop.

Nguyen Huong/Unsplash

# Morning

It's 5:30 a.m. on a scorching Tuesday morning and my heart is pounding as I try to cross the road. I'm in a real-life game of Frogger, navigating a constant stream of mopeds, scooters, motorcycles, cars and trucks. Road rules aren't always followed in Hanoi's Old Quarter. The trick, I quickly discover, is to walk with purpose and the traffic will magically move around you.

It's worth waking up at this ungodly hour to join the hundreds of locals gathered around Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the heart of the city. Against the backdrop of the 19th-century Ngọc Sơn Temple, which rises from the emerald-green waters on a small island, groups of people — mostly women, aged 50-plus — dance to pop music and bust out aerobic moves. Runners circle the water's edge. Couples ballroom dance. Others practice tai chi. It's a delightful scene capturing the spirit of Hanoians. "This is how people get ready for a new day full of energy," says Vu Trung Kien, a tour guide with [Easia Travel](#). "They exercise not only to keep fit, but to socialize as well."

For my own jolt of energy, I head to [Loading T Café](#) for an iced egg coffee, made smooth and foamy like a cappuccino, but without any bitterness. Barista Linh Nguyen says it's the combination of creamy egg yolks and strong robusta brew that makes the drink so special. The discarded egg whites are donated to a nearby bakery for crisp, wafer-thin cat's tongue cookies. The concoction was invented in 1946 by a bartender at the iconic Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi who needed a substitute for milk during a wartime dairy shortage. It's now a staple in cafés throughout the city.

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Post-caffeine fix, I'm ready to explore Hanoi from the back of a vintage Vespa. My driver, Edward, from [Vespa Adventures](#), confidently weaves in and out of traffic, stopping along the way to deliver some interesting history lessons. There's Long Biên Bridge, the oldest Red River crossing, which was used to transport troops and supplies during the Vietnam War. Banana Island lies below, a long strip of fertile land with banana plantations and bike paths, resembling a countryside escape. There's even an unofficial, predominantly male, nude beach.

We zip around West Lake, Hanoi's largest, in a district notably calmer than the city center just 15 minutes away. Expats flock here for its natural beauty, not to mention a growing culinary and fashion scene — [Kilomet109 boutique](#), for example, offers high-end, sustainable clothing. At nearby Huu Tiep Lake, in the French Quarter, we view remnants of an American B-52 bomber that was hit by a surface-to-air missile while flying over Hanoi in 1972.



Try Vietnam's top sandwich at Bánh Mì B+, known for its peppery pâté.

Shawna Cohen



Crisp mango plus spicy beef jerky equal a fresh and fiery salad from Bánh Tráng Trộn.

Shawna Cohen

# Afternoon

For lunch, I meet food blogger Văn Công Tú, one half of the duo behind the popular [Hanoi Street Food Tour](#), who takes me on a jaunt through the fragrant food markets and packed streets of the Old Quarter. French and Chinese influences are prevalent everywhere, from the dishes we sample (stir-fries and bean curd) to the buildings we pass, such as the majestic, neo-gothic St. Joseph Cathedral, one of the first structures built during the French colonial period.

The World Culinary Awards recently named Hanoi [the world's best culinary city](#), ahead of European stalwarts such as Rome and Barcelona. Everything I taste backs that up, including at Ngõ Trung Yên, a tiny hole-in-the-wall that lists just one item on its daytime menu: mien tron muc. The savory dish consists of glass noodles, fried onions and roasted peanuts with crab eggs, a fish patty and a beef and pork roll. "This is the kind of place where you don't ask any questions," explains Tú. "Just hold out fingers for how many portions you want."



The Temple of Literature, a place of wisdom for nearly a millennium.

[Quinh Le Duc/Unsplash](#)

At Bánh Tráng Trộn, I opt for beef jerky atop julienned green mango, Vietnamese coriander, chili oil, toasted peanuts and fried shallots. It's surprisingly refreshing on this humid day. The small baguette sandwich at Bánh Mì B+ is filled with pork, pickled carrots and daikon — the perfect \$1 snack. For dessert, I get chuối chiên, a.k.a. fried banana, served hot from a small stand on a crowded street corner.

I'm ready for a *ngủ trưa*, the Vietnamese equivalent of a siesta, but the Temple of Literature inspires a second wind. Among the estimated 17,000 temples and pagodas across the country, this ancient structure, a [UNESCO World Heritage site](#), served as Vietnam's first university. Built in 1070, the entire complex has withstood multiple wars and restorations yet retains its original architecture, including stone columns and elaborate gates, as well as an intricate altar honoring Confucius, heaped with offerings and incense. I see more locals than tourists using the landscaped grounds — five courtyards, manicured gardens and a central red pagoda — as a photo-shoot backdrop. Turns out, a stroll among bonsai trees and ponds filled with koi fish and lotus flowers is the next best thing to an actual nap.



In a villa-turned-venue, Manzi Art Space hosts indie art exhibitions, workshops, dance performances and a homey café and bar.

Courtesy of Manzi Art Space

## Evening

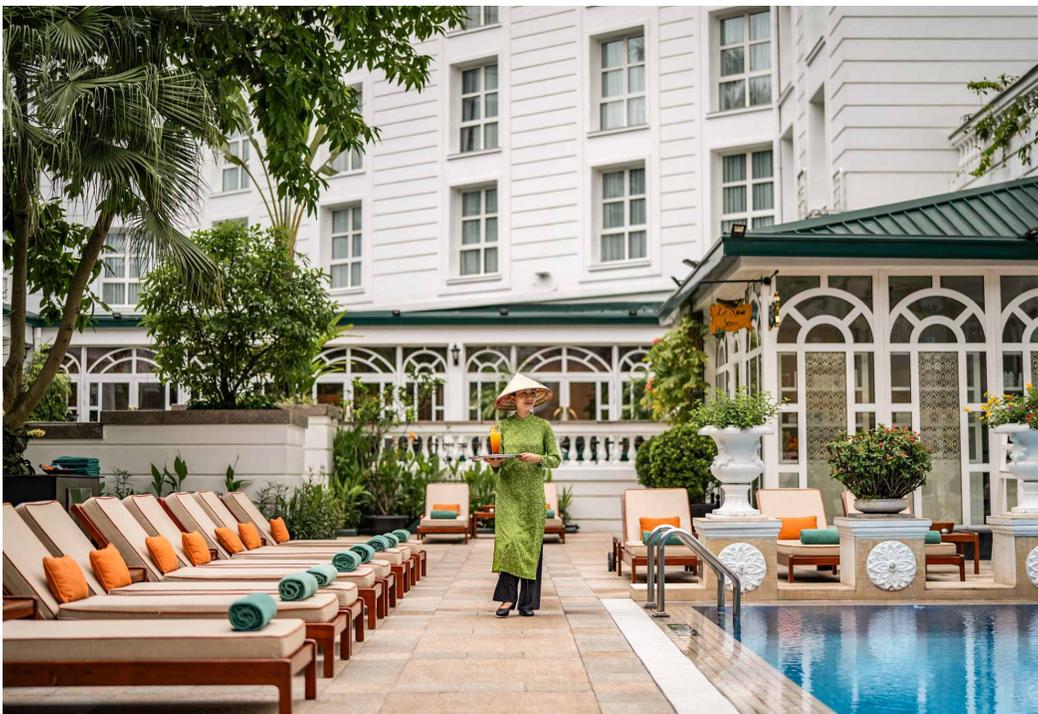
As the oppressive humidity starts to lift, I head to one of Hanoi's longtime creative hubs, Manzi Art Space, housed in a charming 1930s French villa. The airy café's fresh passion-fruit juice is the perfect pick-me-up, but it's the eclectic collection of works by emerging and established Vietnamese artists, such as Hà Đào and Lê Đức Anh, that lures me in. I could spend hours admiring the oil paintings, illustrations and photography, but I've promised my kids a souvenir, so I venture down the narrow streets of the Old Quarter, stopping at some artisan shops along the way.

Cerender Ceramics makes the sweetest hand-painted pinch bowls (perfect for soy sauce on sushi night). Maztermind carries board games with the type of artistry found at Paris ateliers. I fawn over Hanoiopoly, a Hanoi version of Monopoly made from pinewood (tokens are mini versions of the colorful stools found in cafés throughout the city). Eventually, I find what I'm looking for at Maison Marou, an upscale chocolatier: pho-flavored chocolate bars.

Dinner is light following my afternoon of taste-testing. With its entrance hidden down a long corridor and up several flights of stairs littered with cats, you won't find many tourists at Cha Ca Tan Tan. I never would have found it myself without detailed directions. Eating here is like attending a casual dinner party at a friend's apartment. Rock music blares from the open kitchen as I sit down next to a table of 12 or so, joyfully toasting each other and downing shots. I order cha ca, Hanoi's signature dish of turmeric-marinated catfish, served with vermicelli, fresh herbs, chili and fermented shrimp paste.

It's been a full day, but I can't end the night without a Pho cocktail, a refreshingly sweet drink inspired by Vietnam's famed beef noodle soup. At the laid-back Nê Cocktail Bar, the bartender mixes cinnamon, star anise and cardamom with Cointreau triple sec and gin in a shaker as though it's performance art.

As I walk back to the hotel, I'm invigorated despite my 5 a.m. wake-up call. There's an energy here that's both frenzied and relaxed. Restaurant lineups move quickly. People zigzag through tight corridors with a smile. Despite the volume of vehicles on the roads, traffic flows. Between the bursts of colorful fruit stalls lining the streets, wafts of sizzling meat, the bold-yet-sweet taste of coffee and the hoots of horns and schoolchildren at play, Hanoi has put me into sensory overload in the best way possible. I'm not quite ready for it to end.



Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi.

Courtesy of Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi

## Where to Stay in Hanoi

### Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi

French colonial style meets modern amenities at this luxe hotel, located minutes from the Opera House. During the Vietnam War, its bomb shelter protected Joan Baez and Jane Fonda from air raids. Guests can experience the bunker, rediscovered by chance during a 2011 renovation, on an exclusive Path of History tour hosted by the hotel's historian. ♦

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