



THE GLOBETROTTER

72 HOURS IN HO CHI MINH

Three days is just enough to see
the reinvention underway
in Vietnam's biggest city

BY JOSHUA ZUKAS



1

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is one of Asia's great shapeshifters. In the span of only a decade, new skylines emerged, entire neighborhoods became unrecognisable, apartment blocks transformed into creative hubs, and hidden alleyway bars and cafés materialized as if by magic.

In a chaotic world, HCMC has an unusual ability to adapt quickly to global shifts. Economic booms, changing travel trends, new technologies, evolving food cultures, and waves of international influence are absorbed into the city at stunning speed. That flexibility has helped shape HCMC into one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic urban centers, populated with urbanites that are endlessly curious about what comes next.

For many visitors, this constant reinvention is all part of HCMC's appeal. No matter how many times you visit, the city never feels finished. There is always a new restaurant to check out, a new rooftop bar to perch on, a new neighborhood to wander through. HCMC rewards repeat visitors precisely because it refuses to stand still.



2

Opposite page

Officially known as International Square, Con Rua Lake is a vibrant, historic roundabout

1 An authentic Saigon energy right in front of the historic Bến Thành Market

2 The city's aligned skyline

DAY 1

Local legends in the center

Begin the morning with artisanal Vietnamese coffee at **The Running Bean Ben Thanh** (Instagram: @therunningbeansg), a recently opened café designed by local contemporary firm NU Architecture & Design. Then head to the **Independence Palace**, also the work of a Vietnamese architect – albeit one that hails from half a century earlier, when it was built to replace a colonial-era behemoth. The building’s retro interiors, underground command rooms and untouched meeting halls feel suspended in time as the city swirls around it.

For lunch, stop at **Man Moi** (manmoi.vn), where contemporary Vietnamese cooking reinterprets southern flavours in a refined setting. If time – and your emotional bandwidth – allows, spend an hour at the **War Remnants Museum**, a confronting look at Vietnam’s wartime history. Afterwards, head west to the **Secret Weapon Bunker**, an overlooked site hidden inside an ordinary neighborhood house used to store weapons during the war years.

As evening falls, jump in a taxi and head to **Tales by Chapter** (talessgn.com; reservations recommended), where chef patron Quang Dung, a pioneer of the city’s plant-based fine-dining scene, has crafted some of the most inventive vegan menus in Southeast Asia. End the night in nearby **Bui Vien**, the city’s chaotic nightlife street, where plastic stools, beer towers, neon lights, and relentless energy showcase HCMC at its loudest – both visually and aurally.



- 1 Local street food offers an immersive sensory journey
- 2 Bánh mì, the Vietnamese sandwich, is iconic street food
- 3 A glimpse of typical daily life on the streets

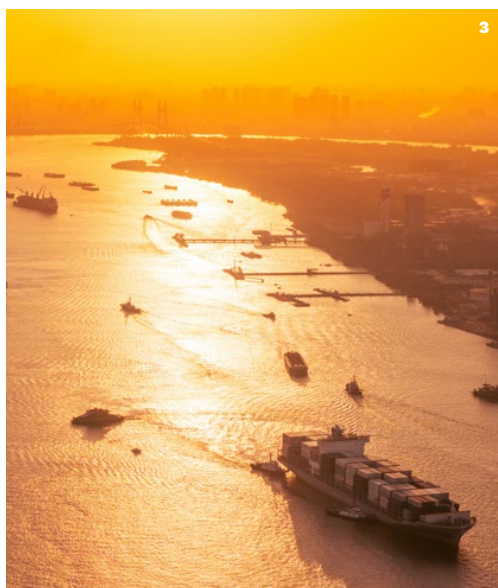


DAY 2

Cosmopolitan character along the river

Start the morning at the brand-new **Cocoa Kitchen** (thecocoaproject.vn) on the Saigon River, where Vietnamese cacao is transformed into elegant bean-to-bar chocolate in a contemporary café and restaurant designed by HCMC-based firm T3 Architects. Afterwards, check out the **Ton Duc Thang Museum**, once housed inside a striking modernist building that reflected HCMC's postwar architectural identity. The original structure was controversially demolished and replaced with a larger contemporary complex that opened last year – a reminder of how suddenly HCMC reshapes itself.

- 1, 2 The interior of Cocoa Kitchen
3 Sunset over the city



From there, stroll north along the Saigon River before diving into the narrow lanes of **Japan Town** for lunch – a lively pocket of the city packed with tiny izakayas, ramen counters and kissaten cafés. Then spend the afternoon exploring the grand colonial landmarks around the **Opera House**, including the historic **Hotel Continental** and the broad promenade of Nguyen Hue Street, where old Saigon and HCMC's modern skyline collide. Pause at **Café Linh** (Instagram: [@tiemcaphelinh](https://www.instagram.com/tiemcaphelinh)) on Ham Nghi, a recreated modernist café, for a break before browsing **Compound Garment** (Instagram: [@compoundgarment](https://www.instagram.com/compoundgarment)) to learn why HCMC is on track to become one of Asia's fashion hubs. Dine at **Yunka** (yunkasaigon.com; reservations recommended), which serves Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) food in a colonial-era corner building upcycled by local firm StudioDuo – and stay for the hedonistic afterparty.



PHOTO CREDITS: SHUTTERSTOCK, MAURITSHUIS THE HAGUE, HOTEL DES INDES

DAY 3

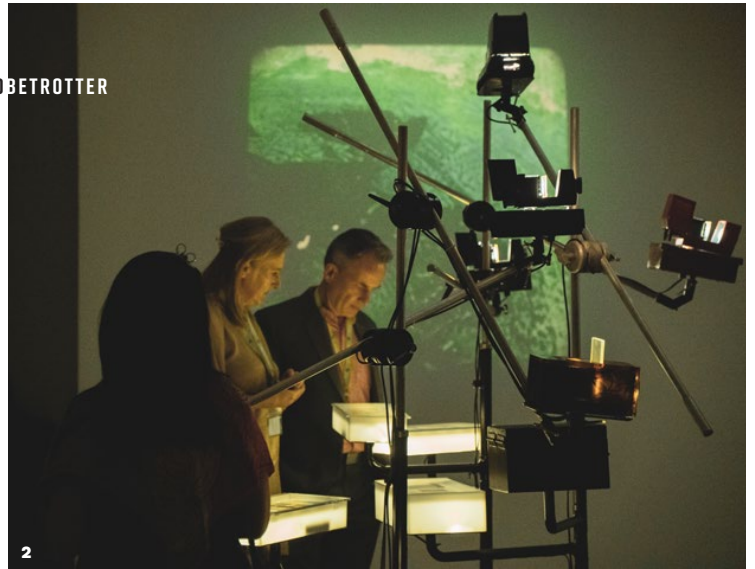
Future forward in suburbia

Begin the day with a taxi ride to one of the two **Nguyen Art Foundation** (nguyenartfoundation.com) galleries. Be sure to check online in advance, as usually only one of the two locations is open. With Vietnam's largest collection of contemporary art, the foundation regularly stages exhibitions exploring the rapid transformation of Vietnam, making it an ideal introduction to the country's creative scene and evolving identity.

In the afternoon, take a ride on the city's new metro system, a glimpse into the future of a metropolis that hopes one day to be crisscrossed by an extensive network of underground and elevated rail lines. Use the journey as an excuse to explore **Thao Dien**, an increasingly international riverside neighborhood. Browse contemporary Vietnamese brands at **Vesta Lifestyle** (vestalifestyle.com), stop at **Café Slow** (Instagram: [@cafe.slow](https://www.instagram.com/cafe.slow)) for coffee or sip wine at **Mad Wine Bar** (madwinesaigon.com). Then finish the trip with dinner at contemporary Vietnamese restaurant **Upstairs** (upstairssgn.com), which this year earned a Michelin Star. 



1



2

Did you know?

Long Thanh International Airport, slated to open later this year just outside HCMC, will eventually handle 100 million passengers annually, making it one of the world's busiest airports.

Recommended menu

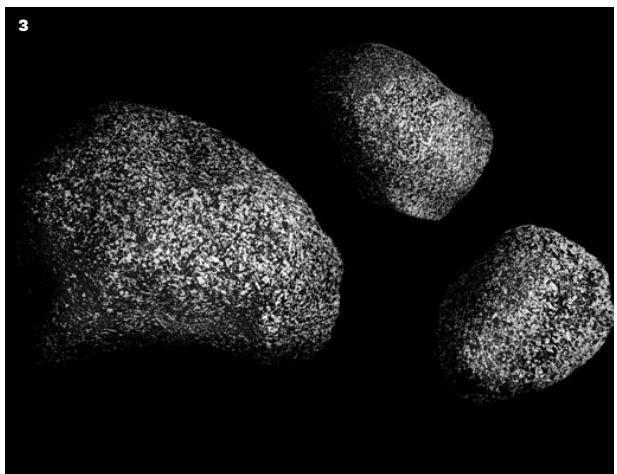
Com tam – HCMC's iconic broken rice dish – is traditionally eaten on plastic stools beside smoky street grills. You can't go wrong at any local spot, though **Godmother** (godmother.vn) offers a more refined reinterpretation with Iberico pork.

The perfect stay

Staying upstream at **Mia Saigon** (miasaigon.com) offers a quieter perspective on the city, with the added bonus of arriving downtown by speedboat – surely one of the most cinematic ways to enter HCMC.

Getting to Ho Chi Minh City

THAI operates twice-daily non-stop flights between Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City. For current schedules and bookings, visit thaiairways.com



3

1 Mia Hotel 2, 3 Displays inside Nguyễn Art Foundation

Opposite Page: Ho Chi Minh City's rapid transit network