NOVEMBER–
DECEMBER 2026

Ethiopian
የአየር መንገድ
The New Spirit of Africa

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Selamta

Hanoi's HERITAGE

44 Bamako Encounters in Mali

50 Gorongosa's Wildlife Revival

36 Island Hopping in the Seychelles



STAR ALLIANCE



As Hanoi grows larger and louder, its heritage is finding new ways to be heard

By Joshua Zukas • Photos by Jack Nguyen Soloman

OLD CITY, NEW TRICKS

Left: Ngoc Son Temple; this page: motorbikes along the Long Bien Bridge



HANOI'S STORY IS WRITTEN IN THE sounds of its streets. After emerging from decades of thunderous war in 1975, Vietnam's capital rang to the tinkle of bicycle bells. As the city grew richer, chirping motorbikes dominated the soundscape before growling cars joined the chorus. Now, as Vietnam continues to develop at a dizzying pace and Hanoi is remade as its gleaming capital, a new cacophony of jackhammers, bulldozers and excavators reverberates through the city.

These are the sounds of Hanoi dreaming big. By 2045, the capital aims to be one of Asia's premier culture hubs, and a string of megaprojects is already in the works. Along the Red River, plans aim to recast its banks as a new cultural corridor, weaving parks and squares with venues for art, music and performance. A landmark opera house designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, the mind behind Paris's Centre Pompidou, is rising from West Lake, a leafy northern suburb. South of the city centre, ground has broken on a 135,000-seat stadium, possibly the world's largest.

Yet for all these grand ambitions, it isn't billion-dollar projects that shape Hanoi's cultural core. That continues to unfold where it did long before the rush to modernise: in the heritage neighbourhoods at the city's heart.







Clockwise from Left: The Imperial Citadel; Quan Su Family Museum; inside the "micro-museum" Quan Su Family Museum

Here, the old city is learning new tricks. Hanoi's embattled **Imperial Citadel,** which has endured almost a thousand years of political strife, is alive again, its courtyards hosting reconstructed royal rituals, digital spectacles and after-dark DJ sets. The **Temple of Literature** and **Ngoc Son Temple,** two of the city's oldest places of worship, have launched nighttime experiences that use light and sound to illuminate a layered past. At **Hoa Lo Prison,** a colonial-era gaol built to torture and execute Vietnamese freedom fighters, visitors can now take a piece of its history home: tea made from the prison's almond trees, whose leaves once offered inmates nourishment, medicine and hope.

But to hear how regular Hanoians are engaging with their heritage, you need to turn down the volume. Barely a block from Hoa Lo Prison, the horns fade as you slip down an alley to **Quan Su Family Museum** (54 Quan Su). "Coming into here is another space," says Do Anh Thu, whose family has lived here since 1958. "You don't really hear the sound of other neighbourhoods. You don't even know if it's raining or sunny."

The balustraded imperial staircase, arched shutters and sunshine yellow facade make the 19th-century French



Left: Temple of Literature at night; below: specialty coffee shop, Ta Café; right: cocktail bar Risu; opposite page: a Hanoi street scene

"THE CHALLENGE IS ENSURING THAT THE ROAR OF PROGRESS DOES NOT DROWN OUT THE STORIES IN ITS PATH."





townhouse one of the neighbourhood's most arresting buildings. The thick stone walls of its sunken ground floor, however, echo the more forbidding architecture of the contemporaneous Hoa Lo Prison. When French rule ended in 1954, the townhouse passed into government hands, and the space behind those walls was divided among several Vietnamese families. Thu's family was allocated a space in the back.

Generations have since grown up in their corner of the old cellar, and at one point eight relatives shared the single-storey, 40-square-metre home. In 2023, Thu decided to open up the family home as a micro-museum, and she filled the space with paintings, photographs, furniture and possessions accumulated over decades. To the soundtrack of pre-1975 Vietnamese classics, Thu guides visitors through the story of her grandmother, a pioneering woman intelligence officer, and her grandfather, a musician, artist, diplomat and the first recipient of the home. The building has been a colonial wine cellar, communal housing, family home, artist's retreat and now museum, each incarnation leaving traces of itself behind.

Several blocks north in Hanoi's tangled Old Quarter, another narrow entrance offers a different portal into the city's past. The newly opened **Silhouette of Thang Long** (75 Hang Bo) packs puppetry, dance, light and shadow into an intimate 45-minute performance. Ca tru, 11th-century chamber music, mingles with contemporary stagecraft. Fragments of neighbourhood fixtures and traditional life flicker in and out of view.

"For us, Silhouette of Thang Long is not only a performance about the past," says Phan Thuy Giang, the production's deputy head of sales. "It is also an effort to make the spirit, stories and cultural beauty of Hanoi more accessible to audiences today." The


64 HÀNG CHIẾU
26
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location is integral to the experience. Reaching the theatre means peeling away from the din-filled Old Quarter and disappearing down a long, serpentine alley, creating a transition between the reality outside and the fantasy within. “Some of the city’s most memorable cultural experiences are not necessarily found on its most prominent streets, but in the quieter spaces behind them,” Giang says. “The alley contributes to the sense of discovery.”

A willingness to cross unassuming thresholds has long yielded rich rewards in Hanoi’s Old Quarter. To reach **Memoire 15** (15 Hang Duong), a post-modern parasitic cafe perched atop a terraced home, visitors must squeeze past a traditional sweet shop. **Gac Banh Mi** (1 Dinh Liet), a Vietnamese baguette shop, and **Risu** (2 Hang Can), a cocktail bar, are hidden up creaky staircases. Part of their appeal lies in their balconies: spaces suspended above the clamour, where the city below seems to play out on another plane.

Much like the Quan Su Family Museum, however, **Ta** (4A Ngo Gach) mutes the city entirely. The café opened in 2024 inside the remnants of a traditional house concealed behind the surrounding streets. Co-founder Vu Thu Thuy fell for the space as soon as she saw its original wooden columns and open-air courtyard. “We decided to restore whatever we could,” she says.

Here, the soundtrack is the clink of cups, the whirr of grinders, the drip of coffee and the murmur of chatter. It is a fitting sound for Hanoi: café culture arrived with the French during the colonial era, but the city has spent more than a century making the ritual its own, from metal *phin* filters and condensed milk to egg coffee and a new generation of speciality brews.

At Ta, a similar story is etched into the architecture; the intention is to

Clockwise from left: Ngoc Son Temple; dancers performing at Silhouette of Thang Long; Vietnamese baguette shop, Gac Banh Mi

allow a contemporary space to inhabit an ancient building without erasing what was already there. “Despite being located in the heart of the city – typically a bustling, noisy area – it is incredibly quiet and peaceful,” Thuy says. She wants visitors to slow down enough to notice the building around them. “There are simple things which can only be truly perceived and understood when one slows down to observe and listen.”

Outside, Hanoi is doing anything but slowing down. The capital’s building boom is transforming it on an unimaginable scale. Skyscrapers, bridges, metro lines and entire new neighbourhoods are reshaping how the city moves, looks and sounds. The challenge is ensuring that the roar of progress does not drown out the stories in its path.

“We don’t know how long we can keep this,” says Thu at the Quan Su Family Museum. For three decades, her family has lived with rumours that the government has other plans for the building and that they will eventually be forced out. If houses like hers disappear, Hanoi risks losing the memories embedded within their walls. “If people lose their homes,” says Thu, “where do their stories live?”



