

# Holiday in Hanoi

BY JOHN THOMSON

“Oh my God,” gushed the teenaged street vendor as my wife and I walked along Hang Dau Street in the heart of Hanoi’s Old Quarter. The Old Quarter is Hanoi’s original shopping district, initially comprised of 36 streets named after the good or service it provided when the area was first established centuries ago. Today, the area has expanded to more than 50 streets, but Hang Dau, the Street of Shoes, still stands out.

“It’s embarrassing,” the young vendor continued as he pointed to my wife’s well-worn sandals. True, the sole looked like it was going to come off and the vendor, who had followed us for half a block with his toolkit in hand, was more than willing to do the repair. Now. At this very moment. On the street. I tensed up as he continued to berate us, but he did it in such a charming way and with a twinkle in his eye that it was hard to fault him for trying to make a buck.

And then as suddenly as it began, the encounter was over. He flitted away, spying another tourist, no doubt, waving us a fond adieu. “Have a nice day,” he shouted as he vanished from sight. It was our second day in Vietnam’s capital city and we were getting a lesson in Vietnamese society.

We were in Hanoi because of its storied past – the settlement is 3,000 years old and has been inhabited, at one time or another, by the Chinese, the French and the Japanese. The promise of great food and cheap digs sealed the deal.

Our hotel, The Hong Ngoc Cochinchine – at \$55 CDN a

night – was a bargain by North American standards, one of many in the Ba Dinh district, a short taxi ride to the prescribed sights, the Opera House, Bach Ma Temple and, of course, the Old Quarter. Ba Dinh is a designated tourist area loaded with English speaking merchants, lots of ATMs and a Kentucky



Fried Chicken outlet, the only western fast food franchise allowed into the city we were told. Whether by accident or design, we never saw anyone eat there.

Hanoi is a city of contrasts. On one hand, we saw leafy boulevards and opulent mansions. Hoan Kiem Lake is literally a sea of tranquility smack dab in the city core, but turning a corner revealed another side of the metropolis: dense Hanoi

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with tall, skinny structures fighting for space while thousands of scooters and motorbikes buzzed about town.

Walking around revealed another facet of Hanoi life; whether it's conducting business, entertaining friends or eating meals, everything happens on the sidewalk. Hanoi is an outdoor society. It's also been called "a plastic chair society" because the locals sit on small plastic chairs – the kind you get in toy stores – accompanied by stubby, truncated tables. We passed families cooking the evening meal on curbside braziers while Hanoi youth, like youth everywhere, huddled over their smartphones addicted to western music and fashion. These little islands of humanity gave us a fascinating insight into Hanoi family life.

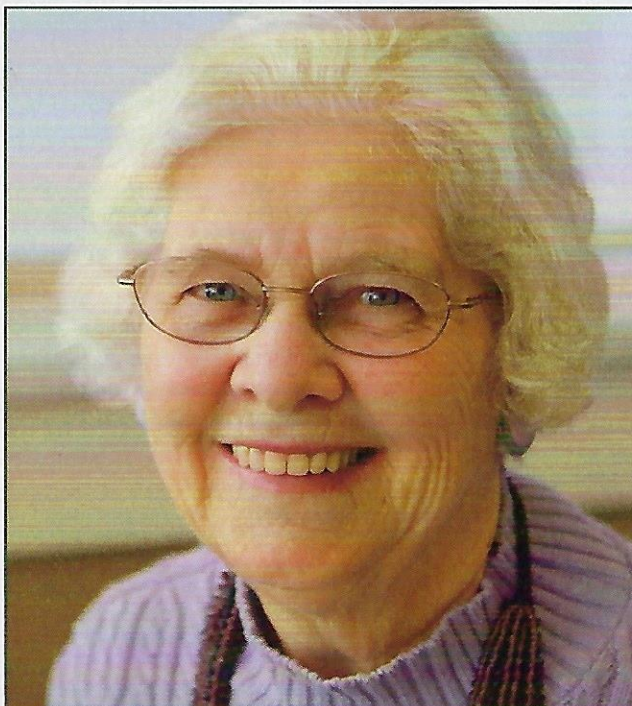
As a history buff, one of my priorities was to learn about Hanoi's transition from a fiefdom to a communist state. The

Ethnology Museum, which pays homage to the 54 ethnic tribes that make up Vietnam, offered a fascinating insight to the country's past. Inside – clothing, utensils and crafts from the country's various regions. Outside – examples of traditional Vietnamese housing from long house to pagoda, as well as an impromptu water puppet show, a fascinating accomplishment considering the puppets are controlled by articulated rods underneath the water's surface. Watch the video at <http://youtu.be/VZwuy9-6y9g>

Next stop, the Vietnam Military History Museum. I approached this one with trepidation. It's been barely 40 years since the end of the Vietnam War, or the American War as the Vietnamese call it, and I expected a jingoistic diatribe against the United States. The outdoor concourse was filled with captured American warplanes and that didn't help. Was this setting the tone? Inside, homemade

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I am the oldest out of 10 siblings; I stayed home to help my mother. I love caring for others. I was a volunteer at different hospitals for many years. What keeps me so youthful is a positive attitude and caring for others.

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weaponry and dioramas showcased Vietnam's conflict with France and America. Thankfully, the propaganda was toned down, but much was made about homegrown ingenuity and persistence and the bicycle brigade that transported food and ammunition down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



Suddenly a column of schoolchildren filed past me on their way to another gallery. "Hello!" they chanted in unison, anxious to practice their English, Vietnam's second language after the fall of Vietnam's economic partner, the Soviet Union, in 1991. "Xin chào" I replied in Vietnamese.



Photos: John Thomson

Hanoi is a young city. Half the population of Vietnam is under the age of 35 and as our Vietnamese friend, Truong Trân, the manager of a nearby eatery, told us his friends are too young to remember the War. Or to care. Vietnam may be a communist state but it has embraced capitalism big time, and tourism too, and wants to make nice with the West. Vietnam's



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largest trading partner is, in fact, the United States (clothing).

Touring the War Museum was a sobering experience and, in a deliberate attempt to escape the solemnity of the occasion, we treated ourselves to a tour of nearby Halong Bay. The Bay is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site because of its 1,600 limestone pillars called karsts, which rise out of the Gulf of Tonkin. It's been called the eighth

the karsts and paddling a kayak around a sheltered lagoon. Our cabin was immaculate and the meals were superb. Our guide, 21-year-old Hieu Dinh, was friendly and knowledgeable. He asked us to call him Hugh because he said he looked like movie star Hugh Jackman. He didn't. We all laughed.

Overall, we found Hanoi both exasperating and exhilarating. Make no mistake, there's poverty, pollution and



wonder of the world. A three-hour bus ride took us from our hotel to Halong City and our embarkation point.

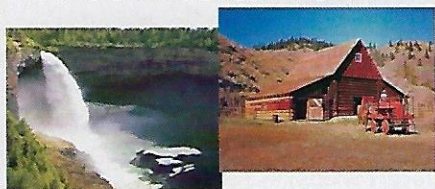
We boarded our boat, L'azalee, a converted junk kitted out in mod cons and tasteful decor, around noon. Afternoon activities included climbing up one of

a ramshackle infrastructure, but there's also optimism and enterprise and an easy going give-and-take vibe that, for me, can be summed up in what I call the ballet of the street.

We had heard the stories beforehand about how difficult it was to cross the

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## IF YOU GO:

There are no direct flights from Vancouver to Hanoi. BC travellers must connect through Europe, China, Australia or Indonesia. We travelled from Vancouver to Hong Kong via Cathay Pacific with a connecting flight to Hanoi via Dragonair.

Hanoi is awash in hotels, from the opulent to the perfunctory. The Hong Ngoc Cochinine at \$55 CDN a night came with free Internet and air conditioning. The legendary Metropole Hanoi can be yours for \$300 CDN; the nearby Hilton costs \$200 CDN a night.

The local currency is expressed in dong. For rapid calculations, we reckoned on 20,000 dong to the Canadian dollar. Large 50,000, 500,000 and 1 million dong notes are commonplace.

road because no one stops for pedestrians. It's true. Survival requires good timing and a stiff resolve. The trick is to look for a break in the traffic and walk slowly and confidently into the stream, while looking drivers straight in the eye. It worked.



Scooters and motorbikes gracefully swerved around us. We had miraculously melded into the rhythm of the street.

Like I said, exasperating and exhilarating.

SL



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