Ahoy, Hanoi!

La Place is the place

Death becomes him

hanoi, vietnam

GET A TASTE OF THIS CAPITAL'S SOUTHEAST ASIAN FLAVORS

[BY TERESA COATES]

THE VARIETY OF exotic adventures that a day in Hanoi offers is reflected in the city's distinct aromas: fresh baguettes and grilled meat, fish sauce and motorbike exhaust, strong coffee and wet cement. If you're looking for an exciting trip that's easy on the wallet, Vietnam's capital, wedged along the bank of the Red River, is the perfect Southeast Asian destination. Its busy streets are filled to capacity with scooters and cyclos (the Vietnamese version of a pedicab), delicious fruit—fresh, dried, chilied, pickled, or mixed with condensed milk and ice—is sold on every corner, and each morning the city's elderly residents surround Hanoi's lakes to walk and practice the painfully slow movements of tai chi. Spring is the best time to visit, when flowers are blooming everywhere and the humidity is bearable, but you might want to plan your trip for fall when Hanoi will celebrate its 1,000th anniversary with all kinds of festivities. Despite its impressive age, this city is still relatively off the beaten path of travelers, so get a peek at its wonderful craziness before the rest of the world gets a clue.

The country's most famous culinary export is phở, the hot noodle soup that's served in trendy spots across the U.S., and there's no better place to slurp it up than Hanoi, so make **Phở Bò Gia Truyên** (49 Bat Đan) your first stop. I'd sell my soul for a bowl of their version of chicken noodle soup, but thankfully it costs less than two bucks. Or try some bún chả, a grilled pork patties–and–rice noodles combo that women cook over hot coals on the sidewalks outside their tiny restaurants. The best in town is served at the one-dish-only **Bún Chả Hàng Mành** (1 Hàng Mành), where they'll seat you hip-to-hip with total strangers and expect you to throw your trash on the floor. (Don't worry, they sweep it up as soon as you leave.)

Once you've filled your belly, check out the **Hai Bà Trưng district**, named after the Trưng sisters, Vietnamese heroines who led a revolution against Chinese invaders in the first century. Get a little history lesson at the **Hỏa Lò prison** (1 Hỏa Lò), often referred to as the Hanoi Hilton by American war prisoners. You won't find much reference to the Vietnam War there but loads about the sadism of the French colonialists who used the prison first. Refuel at **Cong Caphe** (152D Triệu Việt Vương) with a short cup of Vietnam's official beverage: *cà phê sữa*, a delectable mix of strong coffee and condensed milk. If you've got room for dessert, stop at **Fanny's Ice Cream** (48 Lê Thái Tổ), which boasts crazy flavors including durian (a spiky, stinky fruit that people either love

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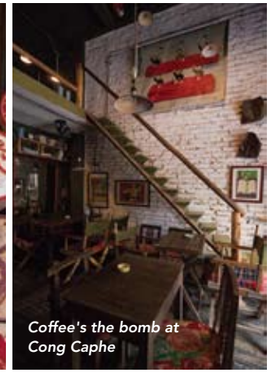
Charmed, I'm sure

Hai Ha Shop gets the stamp of approval


Coffee's the bomb at Cong Caphe

Flower Fashion power

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or hate), avocado, and soybean. The vintage ice cream parlor décor is sweet, but take your cone across the street to **Hoàn Kiếm Lake**, where you can watch tourists, businessmen, lovesick couples, and booksellers circling the jade water.

For a real taste of the city's bustle, head to the **Old Quarter**, a medley of streets that's been the beating heart of Hanoi for centuries. Sidewalks double as storefronts here; the area is characterized by its original purpose as a shopping center where roads were named for what was sold on them: metal, bamboo, sails, tin, and more. Today, the products are different but just as plentiful: you'll still find entire streets devoted to sunglasses (Lương Văn Can), luggage (Lò Sũ), and altar kitsch (Hàng Quat). If you want to take home some traditional fashion, have an *áo dài* (traditional long tunic worn over loose pants) custom-made at one of the silk shops on Hàng Gai, or try the ready-to-wear fusion styles at **Flower Fashion** (92A Hàng Gai). Some of the best souvenir shops are on Hang Manh, but it's easy to miss one of my favorites: **Hai Ha Shop** (22 Hàng Mành), where you can buy customized bamboo stamps. Choose a design from a well-loved three-ring binder, or bring your own image. You'll be amazed at what they manage with a hunk of bamboo, some tools, and a whole lot of skill. When you tire of the cyclo drivers calling to you like your name is Woohoo, hide away on the fabric-swathed second floor of the tiny **La Place** cafe (4 Ấu Triệu), and indulge in one of their delightful fruit shakes.

West of the Old Quarter in the **Ba Đình district** are all things Uncle Ho. The Communist leader is laid out in his finest white suit at the **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum** (Hùong Vương) looking a tad orange and guarded by men with bayonets; get in line early if you want to catch a glimpse. A colossal Ho Chi Minh statue, complete with brass halo and fluffy clouds, stands in the front hall at the **Ho Chi Minh Museum** (3 Ngoc Ha), and just outside is the **One-Pillar Pagoda**, the silhouette of which is emblazoned on all manner of tourist keepsakes.

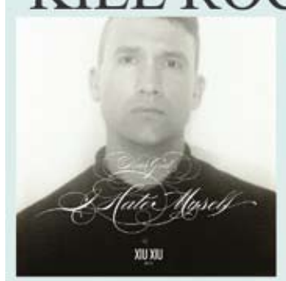
If you still have energy, head to the **Funky Buddha** (2 Tạ Hiện), a trendy new club with stiff drinks, loud music, and a tiny dance floor. Or simply relax with a cocktail at the supermellow **Tadioto Cafe and Bar** (113 Triệu Việt Vương).

Everything is cheap in Vietnam, even the lodging, which will only cost you about $20 a night. One of my standbys, **Charming Hotel** (15 Yên Thái), is tucked down a narrow alley lined with early-morning sellers' carts overflowing with carrots, pineapples, morning glories, and mangoes. Or try the **Paramount Hotel** (28 Ngõ Huyện). Wedged in with tiny homes and tourist haunts, it has a dining room with one of the best views of the Old Quarter.

While you could spend months taking in the wonders of Hanoi, you'll definitely want to head three and a half hours east to the pirate-worthy **Ha Long Bay**. Filled with nearly 2,000 islands and half that many tourists, there are few places more picturesque. Or escape northward on the night train to **Sa Pa** and tour the tiny ethnic villages that dot the terraced rice fields of the area.

There's no place quite like Hanoi, with its eclectic mix of the modern and archaic. Whether you're eating delicious bowls of phở or lounging by gorgeous lakesides, there's plenty to love about this fantastically frantic city.

KILL ROCK STARS



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