

# DISCOVERING



# VIETNAM

[ Story and Photographs By Charles and Mary Love ]

Americans old enough to have lived through the Vietnam War will tell you that the idea of staying in a luxury hotel in Hanoi, or cruising among the limestone peaks of nearby Ha Long Bay, once seemed unthinkable.

But now, with the war long over, attitudes have changed. Americans, along with large numbers of Asians and Europeans, find themselves fascinated with the culture, the landscapes and the cuisine of this vibrant Southeast Asian country.

Those who've studied Vietnam's history have come to appreciate the Vietnamese—an independent-minded people who, for millennia, fought against foreign powers: the Chinese, Japanese, French and, finally, the Americans.

Considering all this, you might expect the Vietnamese to hold a grudge. But Vietnam's population is young (median age 26), a generation with no first-hand memories of the war with the U.S. They seem intent on making the most of *doi moi*, the communist government's relaxed attitude toward free enterprise. And their

A journey to northern Vietnam reveals an energetic capital city, stunning rural landscapes and highlands that are home to colorful ethnic minorities

elders have a practical “let bygones be bygones” attitude.

A first trip to Vietnam should focus on the north, the cultural heart of the country. Here's where legend says Vietnam's first dynasty—the Hung kings—ruled from the Bronze Age until the middle of the third century B.C.

Using Hanoi as a base, it's easy to make excursions into the countryside—to beautiful Ha Long Bay, now a UNESCO World Heritage site, and to mountainous Sa Pa, home to ethnic groups who have preserved their traditional lifestyle.

## HANOI

Hanoi, situated along the banks of the Red River, is one of Southeast Asia's most captivating cities—a place that has retained the seductive charms of a bygone Indochina. Here are stately French colonial buildings (some now attractive hotels,

This Red Dao tribal woman lives near Sa Pa in northern Vietnam. Her tribe lives in small villages in valleys and on mountain slopes and is known for colorful, hand-made fabrics and clothing.







A day in Hanoi: flower vendors brighten the streets (below left); cyclo drivers wait for business (above left); locals meet at the Opera House (top left); girls relax by Hoan Kiem Lake (above).

embassies, restaurants or museums), thousand-year-old temples and tranquil lakes bordered by shady paths.

The city centers on Hoan Kiem Lake. Due north are the narrow streets of the historic Old Quarter and, to the south, the tree-lined boulevards and lovely buildings of the French Quarter.

If you think all this sounds tranquil and orderly, think again. The frenetic ebb and flow of noisy motorbikes, which have replaced the bicycles of an earlier, less prosperous era can overwhelm a first-time visitor. While it's easy to get around on foot, navigating the streets can be a challenge. Traffic lights are few and frequently broken. If they work, they're usually ignored.

Crossing a street can be an act of faith. Pedestrians risk games of “chicken” with oncoming motorbikes, after waiting in vain at

busy intersections for traffic to clear. They stride into the middle of traffic trusting that, if they keep a steady pace, vehicles will flow around them. The intimidated resort to taxicabs, normally easy to catch. Others prefer the less expensive *cyclos*—canopied tricycles, peddled through tidal waves of traffic by unfazed drivers.

Hanoi's neighborhoods come to life before dawn and stay abuzz until late in the evening. Within the warren of narrow streets in the Old Quarter, shopkeepers and open-air market vendors sell vegetables, fruits, flowers, clothing, everyday utensils and Vietnamese art. On the sidewalks, families sit on tiny stools and dine around miniature tables. They eat *pho*, Vietnam's famous beef-and-noodle soup, garnished with fresh herbs and vegetables. Everywhere, lithe women carry wares in baskets balanced on long bamboo poles—an ancient custom linking past to present.

Some streets still specialize, as in ancient times, in specific





products: silver, for example, on Hang Bac Street; paper products on Hang Giây Street; and so forth. But change is afoot with Internet cafes and new hotels sprouting like mushrooms after rain.

At Hoan Kiem Lake, people gather, much as they always have, to stroll or practice *tai chi* in the mornings, play chess or *da cau* (kick badmitten) in the afternoons, and flirt with the opposite sex at any time of day.

Just a few blocks away in the French Quarter, the grand, colonnaded Opera House, completed in 1905, is a favorite meeting place. Young and old alike meet on the front steps of this landmark to socialize or people-watch, whether or not they plan to attend an opera or symphony performance.

West of Hoan Kiem Lake at the Temple of Literature—a centuries-old Confucian temple and site of Vietnam’s first university—strollers escape the urban hubbub beneath banyan and frangipani trees that shade a peaceful complex of temples,

The rice terraces around Sa Pa in northern Vietnam are dominant features in the region's mountainous landscapes (above). Monumental limestone peaks in Ha Long Bay (right).

pavilions, courtyards and lotus ponds.

Five minutes away, Hanoi’s Fine Art Museum showcases Vietnamese art from the Stone Age to the 20th century. Paintings of farmers in bucolic settings and freedom fighters are testament to former rural lifestyles and years of conflict with foreign aggressors.

Also worth visiting are the Museum of History, an architectural masterpiece in the French Quarter housing ancient Vietnamese artifacts, and the Museum of Ethnology, a few miles west of Hoan Kiem Lake, with its open-air exhibitions of Vietnam’s ethnic minority cultures.

Hanoi’s Water Puppet Theatre performs several times daily to sold-out crowds. Water puppetry is a thousand-year-old art with roots in the country’s wet rice-farming culture. With few

diversions in the countryside, farmers in earlier times amused themselves by making puppets and staging lively performances.

Today’s puppets, made of lacquered fig wood, cavort on a watery stage, enacting skits drawn from Vietnam’s folklore: families cruise in primitive boats; water dragons splash about; farm boys ride water buffalo; and fishermen angle for leaping fish—all accompanied by live music and singing.

A trip to Hanoi should include time for shopping. Small, family-run shops in the Old Quarter offer bargains in silk fabrics, custom-tailored garments and jewelry. The contemporary art scene is in high gear and many galleries exhibit high quality Vietnamese paintings, watercolors and oils. “Tourist art” is, of course, inevitable, but the better galleries show work of interest to connoisseurs.

Restaurants are plentiful and offer excellent Asian fare for a bargain. The cheapest option is, of course, “street food” which most visitors are advised to avoid. But at Quán An Ngon, a restaurant popular with locals and tourists alike, a multi-course dinner for a family of three is under \$25.

Even at the Metropole Hotel’s posh Spices Garden Restaurant, known for its masterful presentations and exotic seasonings, the tab is much less than you’d find in high-end restaurants in the U.S. Foreigners interested in continental cuisine gather at the relaxing Press Club (near the Opera House) for cocktails on a balcony overlooking the city and an excellent selection of entrees and desserts.

If time allows, take a day trip by car to the north’s historic handicraft villages (specializing in ceramics, silk weaving or wood carving) or to Tam Coc, a small town south of Hanoi. From this rural

outpost, you can cruise by sampan up the placid Ngo Dong River. Manipulating long oars with their feet, women row the small boats through caves, then into a beautiful landscape of rice fields and limestone peaks.

**HA LONG BAY**

If you make it to Hanoi, by all means arrange the three-hour drive to Ha Long Bay, a coastal area where natural limestone towers rise hundreds of feet from jade-green waters. Nearly 2,000 islands with these limestone formations are scattered throughout the bay, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site over a decade ago.

Ha Long means “dragon descending,” a reference to the Vietnamese legend that the bay was formed when a dragon plunged into the sea and whipped its tail into a frenzy, carving the area into a magnificent archipelago. Clustered at the edge of many islands are “floating villages,” home to families who for generations have plied the shallow waters for over 200 species of fish and more than 450 kinds of mollusks.

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Many boats offer day trips around the bay. A better alternative is to take an overnight cruise on the *Emeraude*, a luxurious replica of a 1910 paddle steamer that once offered cruises in French Indochina. The ship’s crew pampers guests, offering cocktails, cooking demonstrations and even foot massages on the large covered deck. At night, there are full course meals with wine and a late-night showing of the movie *Indochine* under the stars. All staterooms are comfortable and air-conditioned.

To meander among the islands, fjords and inlets in the bay as the panoramas continually change is surreal, especially before dawn when the limestone peaks loom, like giant chessmen, through early morning mists.

SA PA

The mountains and valleys surrounding Sa Pa are home to Vietnam’s exotic ethnic minority people.

On a typical day, you can visit bustling markets where women of the Hmong, Red Dao and Tay tribes wear their elaborate traditional costumes; go mountain climbing (the highest peak is Fan Si Pan, over 10,000 ft. high); or, hike steep rice terraces to far-flung villages.

The town of Sa Pa is perhaps best known for its local market. Tribal women arrive daily from nearby villages carrying huge bamboo baskets on their backs filled with vegetables, fruits, flowers and household items for trade. They also sell brocade and silver jewelry.

Embroidery is a specialty and, with just a little experience, it’s easy to recognize the best items. Newer, cheaper products, mostly from China, are lightweight and brightly colored. Local Hmong bags, hats and tapestries, on the other hand, have subtle colors and feature elaborate geometric patterns in high relief. If you’re friendly, and insist you want something “old,” one of the women might dig deep into her basket and pull out a treasure.

Be sure to make the journey to Sa Pa on the Victoria Express—a luxury train with comfortable, air-conditioned sleeper cars and a stylish restaurant. After a nine-hour ride to the small town of Lao Cai, you transfer to a car or van for the scenic one-hour drive to Sa Pa.

The place to stay is the chalet-style Victoria Sa Pa Hotel, perched on a hill overlooking the mountains.

Rooms—with stunning views, private baths and bedspreads woven by local tribes—are comfortable sanctuaries after a day of hiking. The hotel manages a fine restaurant with fresh Asian and continental cuisine as well as a spa offering a variety of Asian treatments.

EPILOGUE

For many Americans, two Vietnams co-exist: the little understood Vietnam of the war era and today’s Vietnam, a country of people who have survived, even prospered. It’s this Vietnam that stirs memories of splendid mountains, valleys and golden rice fields; of fascinating markets; and, most important, of industrious, forgiving people who have endured extraordinary odds. ➤

HANOI HOTELS

Sofitel Metropole (luxury), [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)  
Hilton Hanoi (luxury), [www.hanoi.hilton.com](http://www.hanoi.hilton.com)  
Lucky Hotel (economy), [www.lucky.com.vn](http://www.lucky.com.vn)

RECOMMENDED READING

*National Geographic Traveler: Vietnam*, by James Sullivan,  
(National Geographic, 2006).

SOME EXCELLENT VIETNAMESE RESTAURANTS

**Emperor Restaurant**, 18B Le Thanh Tong (Hanoi)  
(Vietnamese cuisine in an elegant French villa)

**Spices Garden Restaurant**, 15 Ngo Quyen (Hanoi)  
(Contemporary Vietnamese cuisine in the luxurious Metropole Hotel)

**Press Club**, 59A Ly Thai To (Hanoi)  
(Delicious continental and Asian cuisine)

**Quán An Ngon**, 18 Phan Bội Châu (Hanoi)  
(Vietnamese cuisine in an informal setting)

**Emeraude Classic Cruises**, [www.emeraude-cruises.com](http://www.emeraude-cruises.com)  
(Ha Long Bay)

**Victoria Sa Pa Hotel**, [www.victoriahotels-asia.com](http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com) (Sa Pa)

**Topas Ecolodge**, [www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com](http://www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com) (Sa Pa)

*Charles and Mary Love are journalists and commercial photographers based in Charlotte, NC, and West Palm Beach, Florida. E-mail: [loves@imagesource.us](mailto:loves@imagesource.us) Web: [www.imagesource.us](http://www.imagesource.us)*

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