

TOUR OF BEAUTY

FIRST WAR, THEN PEACE, THEN BACKPACKERS. VIETNAM IS NOW REINVENTING ITSELF AS ASIA'S NEXT LUXURY PLAYGROUND

BY BRAD A. JOHNSON

GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM!
A fisherman in front of the Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake Hotel. *Opposite page, from top:* French Colonial architecture in Hanoi; a religious temple in Hoi An; Square One's wine cellar and bar at Park Hyatt Saigon.



The traffic in Saigon is a blur of motorbikes. Millions of them. Most are tricked out with intricate, wallpaper-like paint jobs, or customized lights, or seat covers made from alligator leather or velvet. Their horns beep relentlessly—politely—to alert others of their encroaching proximity. I'm whizzing through the city on the back of a motorbike taxi (*xé om*) clutching shopping bags from Gucci and Mai Lam (Vietnam's preeminent fashion designer) in one hand while trying to film my adventure with a digital camera held in the other. We're speeding toward a busy traffic circle when the driver's phone rings. "You're not going to answer that, are you?" I ask, thinking it is probably a good idea that at least one of us is holding onto the bike as we bounce through this wildly chaotic intersection.

The driver (whosename is Bay) reaches into a pocket and pulls out a small red phone. He looks at the caller ID, then presses a button to send the call into voicemail. "No worries," he says, twisting his neck so that he can look at me. "It's my wife." Then he flips open the phone and proceeds to type out a text message. Horns honk. The intersection engulfs us and, somehow, we come out on the other side unscathed. Then Bay puts the phone away. Until it rings again.

It's my first day (just two hours after arrival) in Saigon, and, on a whim, I've hired Bay to give me a quick tour of the city. No stops. Just a quick drive-by of the key sites so I can get my bearings. Bay, in his early 20s and wearing a T-shirt and jeans, won the street-corner bidding war for my business (\$3 for an hour, although we will actually finish well ahead of that). Originally, I simply wanted a fast ride back to the hotel after a short trek through the district to find some lunch. But the temperature hovers around 95; the humidity, even higher. And so, for such a meager fee, I suddenly find myself on the back of this bike. *Xé om* are available on every street corner in Ho Chi Minh City (as it's officially named—although most people, especially in the South, still refer to Vietnam's largest city as Saigon). Bikes are by far the most efficient means of getting anywhere in a hurry, and I have a massage appointment at Xuan Spa (at the Park Hyatt) in less than an hour. We speed past the Central Post Office and the Notre Dame Basilica, gothic reminders of French Indochina. We race past Reunification

Palace (formerly the Presidential Palace of South Vietnam) and a couple of ancient pagodas whose names I don't catch. In between, I gawk skyward at the condominium high-rises that are going up. Every 45 seconds or so, we crawl to a halt alongside countless other motorbikes at yet another traffic light, then surge forward in unison, horns gently beeping.

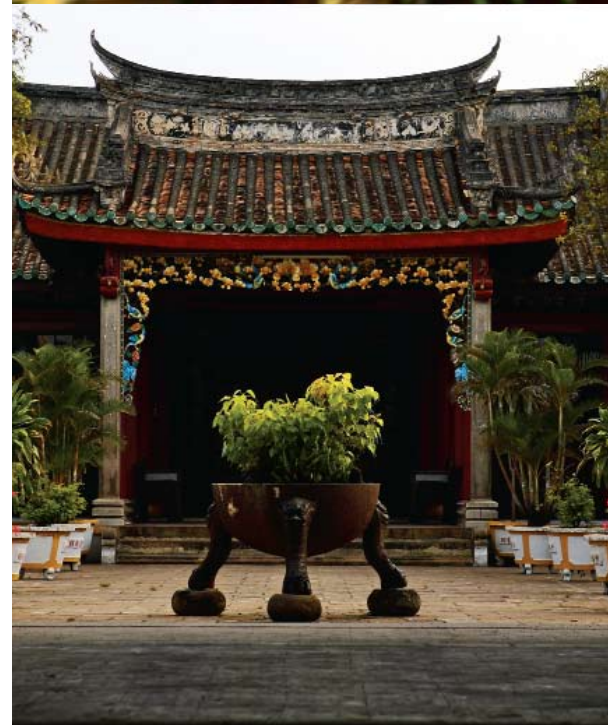
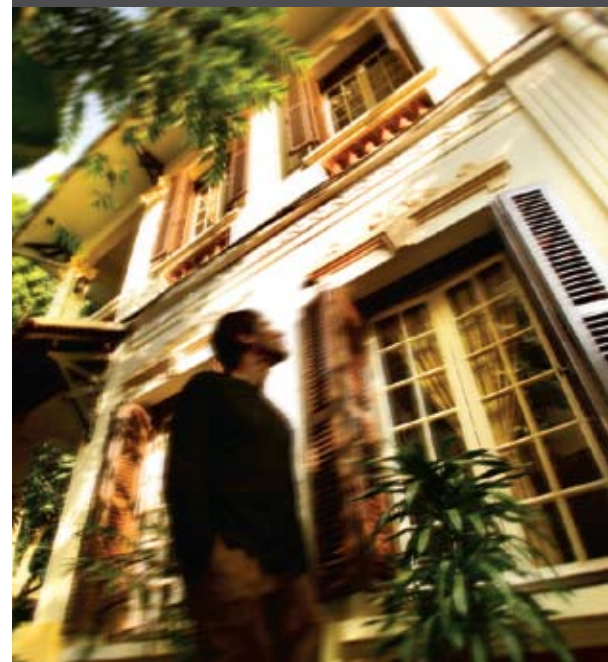
Vietnam—especially Saigon—is hurtling toward the future at an exhilarating rate. The country boasts the fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia. We drive past bustling storefronts for Gucci, Chloé, Marc Jacobs, Façonnable and Balenciaga. "All opened in the last two years!" Bay proudly explains.

To most Americans, Vietnam is still less a travel destination than it is the name of a disastrous war that took the lives of nearly 60,000 Americans and three to four million Vietnamese. More than 30 years after our military conflict here ended, it's still difficult for most Americans to erase history's most enduring image of this country: Eddie Adams' Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of general Nguyen Ngoc Loan assassinating a Vietcong guerilla in the middle of a crowded Saigon street—the very street from which Bay just sent a text message.

THE SOUTH RISES AGAIN

As I hop off the bike, a bellman rushes to assist with my shopping bags. "You are very brave," he says, referring to my choice of transport. "Most of our guests are afraid of the bikes. You travel like us."

There is currently one true luxury hotel in Saigon, and that's the 252-room **Park Hyatt** (rates from \$290, 011.84.8.824.1234, www.saigon.park.hyatt.com), which opened in 2005, marking the beginning of a new era for the city. The nine-story hotel took 10 years to build, after being delayed repeatedly as a result of the Asian economic crisis of the late '90s. The hotel's grand design mimics the French colonial architecture of its District 1 neighborhood: tall louvered windows, sweeping staircases, an elegant stone façade, slow-turning fans, palm trees. The hotel faces the historic opera house (whose immaculate restoration hides any evidence of it ever having been bombed). Most rooms are outfitted with sturdy four-poster beds, an embarrassment of feather pillows and a selection of Japanese and Italian robes. (It takes me about 30 seconds to decide that I look absolutely foolish in the Japanese *yukata*, and so I wrap myself in traditional terry cloth instead.)





CITY SLICKERS Clockwise from above: Milan restaurant at the Intercontinental; a busy street in Hanoi's Old Quarter; the Intercontinental's Sunset Bar and one of its Lotus suites; a cyclo driver taking a break to send a text.



My seventh-floor perch is lovely, with a view of the modern skyline rising in the background—although I secretly pine for a first-floor suite with direct access to the pool. I admire the languid pace of poolside activity, a stark contrast to the chaos outside these heavy stone walls.

I had expected to find great food in Vietnam. But it's actually better than great, especially in Saigon, hands-down the country's culinary capital. I rush from one restaurant to another, from highbrow to low, unable to quench a growing appetite for the local cuisine. At a place called **Quan An Ngon** (138 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, District 1, 011.84.8.825.7179), dozens of former street vendors cook their specialties around the perimeter of a lush restaurant courtyard. I am seated at a crowded picnic table, where I am apparently the only one who doesn't speak Vietnamese, so I point to others' plates and ask my waiter for some of the same. Following my tablemates' leads, I grab a cluster of clumped-together rice paper and peel a single, crispy sheet from the stack. I slice the shrimp paste from its sugarcane skewer and layer it onto the rice paper, along with lettuce, some sort of rice noodle and branches of mint. Two children sitting across from me approve and motion toward the fermented chile sauce, encouraging me to dip.

At the Park Hyatt's truly excellent **Square One** restaurant, I am in awe of a very spicy fish curry with pristine okra, enormous grilled prawns and a gorgeous wine cellar that spans two floors. At the historic **Temple Club** (29 Ton That Thiep, District 1, 011.84.8.829.9244), bathing in the soft glow of silk lanterns and with Oriental rugs underfoot, I discover magnificent charred-beef spring rolls.

The most compelling superstar of Saigon's culinary revolution, though, is Nguen Duc Bien, who was born in Australia to Vietnamese parents who fled during the war. He's returned to his homeland to open the city's most cosmopolitan Vietnamese restaurant, **Xu** (71-75 Hai Ba Trung, District 1, 011.84.8.824.8468, www.xusaigon.com), which incorporates French culinary technique and Australian freestyle spirit. Think luxurious, coconut-braised pork belly, or a grilled, tender goat breast served with green papaya salad. For dessert, a unique panna cotta ushers in the delicate, vanilla-like flavor of pandan.

FINE CHINA BEACH

On the beach in front of **The Nam Hai** (rates from \$750, 011.84.510.940.000, www.thenamhai.com) in Central Vietnam, midway between Saigon and Hanoi and about 12 miles south of Da Nang, the sand is as pure as freshly milled sugar. The perfectly groomed coconut trees tilt toward the



ROCK STARS: Halong Bay, just outside Hanoi.

sea. There is not another resort (or tourist) in sight. The only visible signs of activity are the few dozen bamboo fishing boats, each the size of a hot tub, that line the shore just north of the hotel. Using long poles, fishermen in conical hats push these tubs around the shallow ocean, like gondoliers, on their twice-daily quests for fish.

This 10-mile stretch of South China Sea coastline between Da Nang (whose airport served as a critical base for the U.S. military) and the quaint village of Hoi An (a small port town where brothels once prospered) became known around the world during the war as China Beach—the inspiration for a popular television show in the '80s. The Vietnamese didn't initially appreciate the Chinese moniker, but the central-coast tourism industry now embraces its global notoriety as a valuable marketing tool, just as the region prepares to take off. Farther up the coast, a massive Hyatt nears completion, and elsewhere in the region, luxury resorts from Raffles, Banyan Tree, Four Seasons and, possibly, Ritz-Carlton (still in negotiations) will debut during the next few years.

For now, though, The Nam Hai is the one to beat—and that's going to be an extremely tall order. The most exclusive luxury hotel in Vietnam, it is the brainchild of hotelier Adrian Zecha and his elite GHM hotel group. Zecha was the original owner/creator of Aman Resorts and, before that, one of the founders of Regent Hotels (later gobbled up by Four Seasons). Designed with minimalist

Southeast Asian aesthetics—dark teak furniture, timber floors, intricately carved wooden screens, sunken tubs, shower gardens—the resort comprises 100 private villas sprawled across more than half a mile of private beach. Forty of the villas have their own plunge pools, although mine does not. The spa is utterly exquisite.

I brew myself a rather expert cappuccino, then climb back into the goose-down comfort of my elevated platform bed and watch the morning sun as it rises from the ocean. Mosquito netting gently sways in the ceiling fan's draft as I ponder where I'm going to eat today. Which brings me to The Nam Hai's only misstep: The restaurant is stunningly beautiful, but the food is soulless.

So, after two lavishly expensive yet failed attempts at dining in the hotel, I set out to find something to eat in Hoi An. I ask the concierge about a couple of places I've read about—**Brother's Café** (27-29 Phan Boi Chau, 011.84.510.914.150) and **Bale Well** (45 Tran Hung Dao St., at Le Loi Street). "Yes, yes, Brother's is the best restaurant in Hoi An. Very beautiful," he says. "I will call for you and request a table overlooking the river."

"But Bale Well," he continues, shrugging. "I don't think you will like. It is mostly locals who eat there. You squat on little stools in the alley. Probably not what you're looking for."

"I want amazing food," I say. "I don't care if I have to squat."

He scrunches his brow and looks at his colleague. Neither is quite sure what to say, so I break the silence. "Would you eat there?" I ask.

They immediately respond in unison: "We love to eat there! But it's very local. You might not feel comfortable."

"Will you draw me a map?" I ask.

It's a tricky place to find, basically a street-food stall tucked into a slender alley. But I spot the locals crouched on tiny red-plastic stools. I begin to scour the scene for an empty seat, and within seconds, the grandmother who runs the joint grabs me by the arm and forces me to sit. I don't say anything. The food just starts arriving. Basically, it's the same sort of do-it-yourself spring rolls that I enjoyed at Quan An Ngon in Saigon, but with an even richer sense of time and place. (If only The Nam Hai could somehow lure this old woman to cook at the resort!) I eventually get around to sampling the fare at Brother's Café, too, and the charcoal-grilled chicken wrapped in pandan leaves is superb.

The resort's culinary hiccup aside, it's hard not to love The Nam Hai. And my first two days here are luxuriously, head-clearly calm. Then, on the third day, a Spanish family sweeps into town like some regal entourage. I overhear that they've just flown in from attending the Olympics, where they cheered a family member in the sailing events in Qingdao. Three gracefully calm women and three wound-up teens destined



TRANQUILITY BASES From top: The outdoor dining room at The Nam Hai in Hoi An; French Colonial grandeur reborn at the new Park Hyatt Saigon; cast-iron art in Hoi An; the luxurious spa at The Nam Hai.



for modeling careers (two girls and a boy, around 17-ish) ascend upon the pool and commandeering 10 deck chairs. They speak with a Spanish dialect that portends royal lineage, and the whispers quickly spread through the grapevine at the pool: “Are they?” “Aren’t they?” “Didn’t the prince of Spain compete in the regatta?” Whenever they roll an R, their words become exponentially longer and more romantic. Their beautifully lispéd Ss spray fine mists into the stifflingly hot tropical air.

“For(rrrrrrrr) Spain!” the boy calls out as he dives into the once-serene pool, whose water splashes excitedly over its slate infinity edge. “Ocho!” “Diez!” the girls respond, scoring his cannonball. Suddenly, guests all around are rousing from lethargic slumbers and ordering fresh rounds of tropical drinks. The bar becomes a whirl of frozen cocktails and laughter and gossip—just in time for a magnificent sunset. “For(rrrrrrrr) Spain!” Another big splash. “Ocho!”

NORTHWARD HO

I’ve never held my face so frighteningly close to a skillet of boiling grease before, but I don’t have much choice. It’s my first night in Hanoi, the air is fragrant with curry, and guests in the upstairs dining room at **Cha Ca La Vong** (14 Cha Ca St., 011.84.4.825.3929) are packed like sardines. My chair is a few inches too short for the rickety table at which I’m seated, and the tabletop charcoal fire smolders just a few inches from my face. A precariously balanced skillet roils with bite-sized pieces of monkfish and a handful of chopped leeks, dill and curry. I reach into the cauldron with my chopsticks to remove the fish and herbs as everything turns crisp and golden—which happens very fast—transferring the drippy mess to a small bowl filled with rice noodles, which instantly turn yellow. Waitresses dash around the room, delivering more charcoal fires and bubbling skillets the very instant anyone sits down. Cha Ca La Vong serves only this one dish, and has been doing so in exactly this manner for more than 100 years. It is probably the greasiest thing I have ever eaten, and it is also the best \$4 I’ve ever spent.

I pass most of my time in Hanoi being pushed around the city in a cyclo (a canopied tricycle rickshaw, with a driver in back, at about \$2 per hour), pursuing two futile quests: to match (or best) the culinary high point of Cha Ca La Vong, and to find a great massage. I quickly discover that the city’s best Vietnamese restaurants are found in or around the northern capital’s historic Old Quarter. Sometimes the cyclo driver waits outside for me to finish. Other times, he flees, but another one is never hard to find.

There’s a replica here of Saigon’s “streetfood” restaurant **Quan An Ngon** (18 Phan Boi Chau, 011.84.4.942.8162), but the original in Saigon was better. After an exasperating exchange with my newest cyclo driver, I still cannot discern the infinitesimal difference between the pronunciation of Ly versus Le—but I come to realize I’ve sent my exhausted driver on a wild goose chase with me in his carriage. We finally arrive at my desired destination, a glorious mansion that has been transformed into a sprawling series of lounges known as **Ly Club** (51 Ly Thai To, 011.84.4.936.3069), where I wallow in French Colonial splendor on a rattan chaise with velvet cushions while eating tempura spring rolls and stir-fried beef with thin rice noodles. And at **Club Opera** (59 Ly Thai To, 011.84.4.824.6950), another restored, three-story mansion-turned-restaurant/lounge, the colonial nostalgia includes a tasty duck à l’orange. Still, for all of Hanoi’s posh dining options, nothing ever bests the curried fish at Cha Ca La Vong—or even the next best thing: *bun cha*, which are ground-pork patties wrapped in lettuce leaves and sold by street merchants on a tangle of crooked little lanes in the Old Quarter.

“You want massage? I have good place!” my new cyclo driver says. Finally, a driver who speaks my language.

“Are you talking about a spa?” I ask. “Or simply someone who likes to give *massage*?”

“Spa? What is a spa?” he asks.

“Just keep pedaling,” I say.

Hanoi’s Old Quarter, where most of the city’s cyclos operate, is the only part of town many tourists ever see. And until October of last year, there was only one luxury address in Hanoi, the **Sofitel Metropole** (rates from \$330, 011.84.4.826.6919, www.hanoi.sofitel.com), the epitome of French Colonial glamour situated on a tree-covered Old Quarter street, near embassy row.

The new **Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake** (rates from \$300, 011.84.4.270.8888, www.intercontinental.com/hanoi) is determined to undo the Sofitel’s long-held monopoly on Hanoi’s first-class jet-setters. The new hotel’s gambit starts at the airport.

Upon my arrival in the capital city, the Intercontinental’s limo is waiting for me outside the terminal, and the hotel’s staff swiftly shuffles me through baggage claim, directly to the crisply air-conditioned car. “Welcome to Hanoi, Mr. Johnson. Here is your room key,” the valet says. “If you’ll be so kind as to sign this registration form while on the way into town, you may bypass the front desk and go straight to your suite when you reach the hotel.”

The 363-room Sofitel still attracts an extravagant clientele, for sure. But the city’s younger, hipper, non-embassy-related visitors

clearly prefer the Intercontinental. The 359-room hotel is built entirely over water, a dramatic floating island on the shore of West Lake (or Ho Tay, as it's called in the local tongue), the largest of Hanoi's urban lakes. Two wings of the hotel straddle the lake's western bank, while the remaining rooms and suites are situated in pavilions that hover above the lake's tranquil surface, moored to the hotel by a network of curved, pier-like footbridges that are illuminated at night by kerosene torches. The incessant honking of Old Quarter traffic is nowhere to be heard.

The rooms are decorated in a timeless Asian style that is neither too starkly modern nor overly nostalgic. I fumble with the remote to silence my LCD TV—which is almost gigantic enough to be hanging in Times Square—so that I can take in the sights and sounds of the lake. From my balcony, I see two adolescent boys dangling bare feet in the water, their bamboo fishing poles planted firmly in the mud. Strange birds coo from a nearby willow tree. Inside my suite, I open the drawers of a red lacquer box to find freshly baked French macarons and bittersweet chocolate truffles from the hotel's patisserie. I wander outside to the aptly named Sunset Bar, on a small island just beyond the green-marble-tiled swimming pool, and settle into a muslin-swathed cabana to watch the sun disappear beyond the lake, behind a city that is beginning to twinkle in the distance.

It's hard to imagine that Ho Tay is where John McCain's plane was shot down in 1967. He sank to the bottom of this very lake. This was the scene of his brutal capture by an angry mob.

The city is currently constructing a footpath (scheduled for completion in 2009) that will entirely encircle Ho Tay. I walk the path as far as it extends for now, pausing to admire an 800-year-old pagoda. I peer nonchalantly into the windows of the five-story mansions that line the shore. Young couples hold hands on park benches. Men gather to play cards in the shade. I admire the balance and slow-motion poise of the neighborhood elders, who are practicing tai chi. I venture one block away from the lake and buy a rotisserie duck from a street cart, then return to enjoy it on the grass, at water's edge. The atmosphere is utterly charming. West Lake is a welcoming contrast to the chaotic heartbeat of Hanoi's Old Quarter.

The only thing missing in Hanoi right now is a world-class spa like the ones at Park Hyatt in Saigon and The Nam Hai in Hoi An. The Sofitel will debut one soon, though. And the Intercontinental promises to unveil an over-water spa, hopefully next year. "We're working on it," the manager assures me. "And it's going to be amazing. You'll have to come back!"



STREET-FED *From top:* Eating on the street in Hanoi; a fisherman's wife selling anchovies at the central market in downtown Hoi An.