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the place

HOI AN

Tourists in Old Town don traditional ao dai.

HOI AN EMBODIES Vietnamese charm. Convenient, compact and charismatic, it supplies essential local experiences in easily digestible form. Just a 30-minute drive from Danang's international airport, which now services non-stop flights from Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Korea, Macau, Hong Kong and Malaysia among others, the town nestles on the Thu Bon River a few kilometers from the coast. Its UNESCO-listed old center—a colorful jumble of Japanese merchant houses, Chinese temples and French colonial buildings—evokes its heritage as the trading center of the Champa Kingdom. Hoi An is a mighty tasty proposition as well, with a glut of delicious indigenous dishes, and an informed dining scene. Just take a stroll.

BY DUNCAN FORGAN.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
AARON JOEL SANTOS



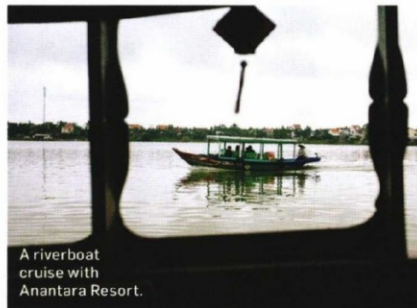
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Visiting a countryside temple with Vietnam Vespa Tours.



Making rice pancakes in a nearby village.



A riverboat cruise with Anantara Resort.

Ask an Insider

Etienne Bossot
manager of Hoi An Photo Tour and Workshop



"Catch the sunset on the bridge heading to An Bang Beach on Hai Ba Trung. The juxtaposition of palm trees and fishing boats makes a great subject. In my view, Hoi An looks its very best early in the morning so if you want to capture the town in its prime I advise hitting the streets between 6 and 8 a.m. That way you will also avoid the tourist traffic. Lastly, remember to smile. Hoi An has some of the friendliest people in Vietnam and interaction will get you a long way if you want to take portraits."

TOURING TOWN

Although Hoi An is an easy place to navigate independently, it just takes a bit of initiative or an operator who offers bespoke tours to visit places that you might not reach otherwise.

SELF-GUIDED STROLL

The warren of streets and alleys set back from the Thu Bon River reveal Japanese merchant houses, Chinese pagodas, ancient tea warehouses. The most iconic symbol of the town's trading past is its beautiful covered **Japanese bridge**, a faithful recreation of a bridge originally built in the 1590s. Other highlights include the ornate **Cantonese Assembly Hall**, featuring kitsch and colorful dragon statues, and **Tran Duong House**, built in French-colonial style in the 19th century. *Japanese Bridge: Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. Cantonese Assembly Hall: 176 Tran Phu. Tran Duong House: 25 Phan Boi Chau.*

PICTURE PERFECT

With a riverine setting, amazing architecture and a surrounding tableaux of swaying palm trees, emerald rice paddies and long beaches, Hoi An offers enough eye candy to keep even the speediest shutterbug constantly clicking. French photographer Etienne Bossot of **Hoi An Photo Tour and Workshop** helps both budding snappers and experts find the best photographic opportunities in town on his specialized photo tours. *42 Phan Boi Chau; hoianphototour.com; tours from VND1,000,000 per person.*

ON TWO WHEELS

The pancake flat topography of Hoi An and its surrounding countryside make for easy independent biking expeditions. But for a slightly more nuanced view of the area, try one of the countryside tours organized by **Vietnam Vespa Adventures**. With the expert knowledge of local guides informing the routes, tours give guests an authentic flavor of rural Hoi An, the highlights including visits to hidden temples, artisan weavers and precarious river crossings on rickety wooden bridges. *134 Tran Cao Van; vespaadventures.com; tours from VND1,550,000 per person.*

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/ the place / HOI AN



Poolside at Four Seasons Nam Hai.

WHERE TO STAY

+ A recent rebranding has only enhanced the status of the **Four Seasons Nam Hai** as perhaps Vietnam's preeminent top-end property. The all-villa resort features design-led residences with sunken living rooms and tented beds on raised platforms as well as trimmings such as outdoor rain showers and Bose stereos. A beach bar and an enhanced state-of-the-art cooking academy are new additions. Special mention goes to the property's award-winning spa, where separate pavilions are built over a lily pad-studded lagoon offering the ultimate in privacy and luxury. fourseasons.com/hoian; doubles from VND17,000,000 per night.

+ An easy walk from the old town, the **Anantara Hoi An** benefits from an outstanding riverside location. Rooms are in a low-rise, two-level, colonial-style building and have views of either the river or the resort's garden courtyard. An onsite Irish pub does Hoi An's best pint of Guinness while relaxing river cruises, exemplary service and a sizeable outdoor pool are among the other major perks. hoi-an.anantara.com; doubles from VND5,200,000 per night.

+ Another fine option close to the old town action is the **Hotel Royal Hoi An**, which features the easy-going luxury guests have come to expect from Sofitel's MGallery collection of hotels. Highlights here include stylish bathrooms with giant tubs, an Art Deco-style pool with an ornately patterned tiled floor and magical views over the river from higher rooms. accorhotels.com; doubles from VND4,000,000.

+ At the **Almanity Hoi An**, the hotel's superb spa is a star—and guests get one free 90-minute treatment for every day they stay. A holistic philosophy permeates the property with free use of bicycles and a restaurant serving determinedly healthy fare accentuating the clean-living ethos. almanityhoian.com; doubles from VND2,500,000.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Hoi An is a great gateway to outdoor activities.

BEACH

China Beach is Vietnam's most legendary stretch of sand. An R-and-R spot for U.S. troops during the Vietnam War, it is wide and welcoming, with Monkey Mountain and the Cham Islands in the distance. September to March brings consistent quality breaks; **Danang Surf School** (84-121/666-6722; lessons US\$70) rents boards and gives lessons. An Bang beach is an expat favorite with relaxed bars and the new **The Deckhouse** (meal for two VND400,000) is convivial for craft beers and fresh seafood.

GOLF

Vietnam has some great picturesque links, and the strip between Hoi An and Danang is home to two championship golf courses: **Montgomerie Links** (montgomerielinks.com; 18-hole visitor green fee from VND2,700,000) and the **BRG Danang Golf Resort** (dananggolfclub.com; 18-hole visitor green fee from VND2,650,000).

MY SON

The one-time intellectual center of the Champa Kingdom that ruled large swathes of Vietnam until the 19th century, the ruins of My Son temple complex—which were aggressively bombed during the Vietnam War—make for an interesting day trip. *The Sinh Tourist*; 587 Hai Ba Trung; thesinh tourist.vn; half-day tours from VND209,000.

DIVING

The Cu Lao Cham archipelago offers the most northerly diving on Vietnam's eastern seaboard and dazzles divers with underwater eye candy. *Cham Island Diving Center*; vietnamscubadiving.com; dive trips from VND1,600,000.



China Beach at dusk

RETAIL THERAPY

Hoi An has become a hotspot for having a suit made or a dress copied—"you need a tailor?" will become a familiar refrain during a visit. The ancient buildings are brimming with cute boutiques and upscale souvenirs.



Haute couture in a Hoi An tailor shop.

MADE TO MEASURE

Some attribute Hoi An's plethora of tailor shops to its history as a center for the silk trade. Others believe the phenomenon comes from a Vietnamese propensity for copycatting. Either way, this is a suit center, with several reputable (and many not so reputable) tailors in town. **Yaly Couture** (47 Tran Phu; yallycouture.com) is expensive but highly regarded. Other good names include: **A Dong Silk** (62 Tran Hung Dao; dong silk.com) and **Thu Thuy** (60 Le Loi; thuthuysilk.com).

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FROM LEFT: Lighting up Home Hoi An; Mango Mango's modern twist on *bun thit nuong* (grilled pork and rice noodles).

Ask an Insider

Duc Tran

chef/proprietor of Mango Mango restaurant group



EAT AND DRINK

From street stalls to lavish fine dining, Hoi An has Vietnam's best selection of restaurants outside Hanoi and Saigon. And the bar scene isn't too shabby either.

BATTLE OF THE BANH MI

There's a tasty battle being fought over the identity of the town's best *banh mi* (Vietnamese sandwich), of which Hoi An's versions are particularly legendary. Some (including celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain) wax lyrical about the version served up at **Phuong Banh Mi** (2B Phan Chau Trinh) near the town's main market. Others yield more to the alchemy of **Madam Khanh** (115 Tran Cao Van), the self-proclaimed "Banh Mi Queen" of Hoi An. From VND25,000 per sandwich.

CONTEMPORARY CUISINE

Chief among Hoi An's culinary innovators is Duc Tran, the Vietnamese-American chef/proprietor of **Mango Mango, Mango Rooms** and **Mai Fish**. Mango Mango (45 Nguyen Phuc Chu; themangomango.com; meal for two VND1,500,000), his flagship riverside venue, has recently undergone extensive renovation with an extended bar area and upstairs area offering diners more room to enjoy fusion dishes such as pan seared red snapper with ginger, onion and roasted black pepper, or beef chunks flame-broiled with Cuban rum

and served with mango salsa—as well as a rainbow of potent cocktails.

FINE DINING, HOI AN STYLE

Well established as one of the town's preeminent dining venues is **Morning Glory** (106 Nguyen Thai Hoc; msvy-tastevietnam.com; meal for two VND1,700,000) where menu highlights include roast duck leg served with a five-spice dressing, and crunchy tofu coated in young sticky rice. Also notable is the new **Home Hoi An** (112 Nguyen Thai Hoc; homehoianrestaurant.com; meal for two VND1,500,000), where local favorites

such as *com ga* (chicken rice) and *banh dap* (smashed rice pancakes) are served in an elegant old townhouse.

COCKTAIL TIME

It is easy to let your hair down in surprisingly hip Hoi An. **White Marble** (98 Le Loi), the town's only wine bar, has a selection to impress even the fussiest oenophile, and a prime corner spot that offers great people-watching. Nearby, **Q Bar** (94 Nguyen Thai Hoc) is a mainstay of the Hoi An scene and has a cocktail list to rival the classiest nightspots in Saigon or Hanoi.

"Com Ga Long at 53/16 Phan Chu

Trinh is my favorite place in Hoi An. They start you off with some crispy shredded papaya and thin slices of onion and lime juice on the side before giving you a juicy half chicken with soft and fluffy golden turmeric rice. Just add the cold beer for perfection. For *cao lau* (Hoi An's signature noodle dish made with pork and local greens) I like to visit **Cao Lau Miss Thao** at 12 Tran Quoc Toan. It is a little bit away from the center but it is worth the early morning bike ride. The pork loin is tender and she seasons it beautifully with five-spice powder, soy sauce, lemongrass, black pepper and garlic."

SEDUCTIVE SOUVENIRS

The town is famous for Chinese-style lanterns, which family-run **Hoi An Handmade** (hoianhandmade.com) has been crafting for generations. At **Meo Meo Atelier** (meomeoembroidery.com), owner Pham Thi Ngoc Tram merges colors, designs and textures into embroidery masterpieces. Browse modern lighting and furniture at **Mosaic Decoration** (mosaique-decoration.com), and cross the bridge to **Randy's Book Xchange** (bookshoian.com) on Cam Nam Island to pore over used volumes.



Weaving bamboo rugs in a small rural village.