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"Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom."

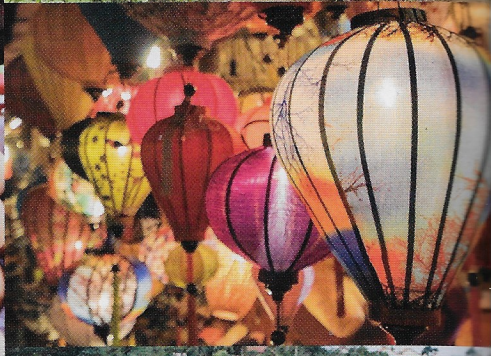
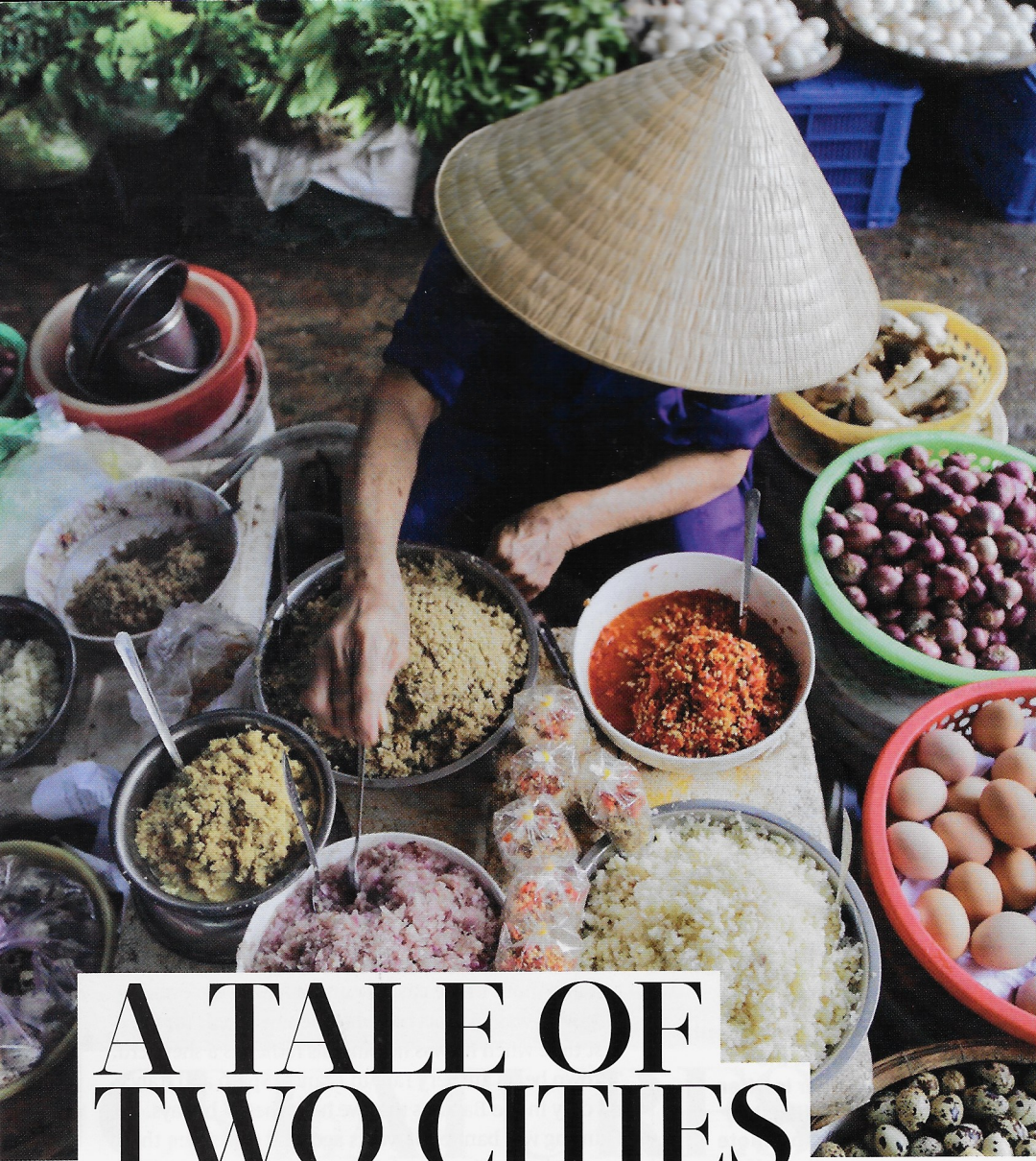
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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

While most travellers to Vietnam head straight for Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, there are plenty of unexpected – not to mention tasty – travel moments in the heart of the country.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATASHA DRAGUN

It's dusk in Hoi An, but instead of streetlights, the petite waterside city is beginning to be illuminated by colourful lanterns. Some float past me, down the Thu Bon River, on makeshift platforms. Others glide into the air, flames fuelling their upward motion. Still more hang in doorways, a rainbow of electric hues and patterns and in just as many shapes and sizes. If you thought this Vietnamese city couldn't get any more luminous, think again.

Held on the 14th day of each lunar month, the Full Moon Lantern Festival transforms Hoi An into a riot of colour – well, even more colour. Once the principal port of the Cham Kingdom, which controlled the strategic spice trade with Indonesia from the 7th to the 10th century, Hoi An's old town is a maze of narrow streets, lined with Chinese-style shophouses: attractively decaying, tile-roofed buildings with louvred windows and chipped, yellow plaster. The lovely pedestrianised

streets are film-set perfect and the ideal base for tailor shops, leather stores and artisans selling lacquered bamboo bowls.

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

At the Old Town's heart is the Central Market, where stalls sag under the weight of everything from dragonfruit to betel leaves and mounds of fresh tofu. A number also make *cau lau*, Hoi An's culinary claim to fame. We join locals at laminex tables and order bowls of the hand-cut noodle dish, which comes laced with sliced pork, crunchy rice crackers, spices and fragrant herbs. Chopsticks clatter, beer bottles clink and fans churn lazily overhead. It's one of those meals that only costs a handful of coins, but that I'd gladly pay a king's ransom for.

Hoi An is known for its diverse and excellent food, a legacy of the many nationalities – Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese – that have lived or traded here over the

THE SIGHTS & SMELLS

Clockwise, from top left: Hoi An's aromatic markets; local gardeners supply nearby resorts; lanterns light up the city; repurposed boats.

centuries. The French-colonial influence is also apparent, most notably in the form of *bánh mì*, the famous baguette, made here with rice flour instead of wheat. The spongy bread is smothered with pate and chilli sauce before being topped with barbecued pork, sausage, fried egg, pickles, papaya, carrots, parsley, soy and often a "special" secret sauce.

The melting pot of cultures and cuisines we see in the streets is also on show at the Anantara Hoi An, a colonial-style resort on the banks of the caramel-coloured river. A short walk from the main market, the Anantara's whitewashed buildings are enveloped by tropical flora. The French-influenced Heritage Bar is packed with revellers nightly. The restaurant here does its own version of *bánh mì* and for breakfast there's a station dedicated to *pho* soup. First,





AN ENCHANTING PLACE

Clockwise, from top: Strolling down the lanterned streets of Hoi An; a smiling local; tourists learn to make lanterns; a bustling street in the Old Town district of Hoi An.

choose your noodles, then fill your bowl with warming broth, meat, tofu, herbs and a handful of bean sprouts – a squeeze of lime and spoon of chilli round things out and make this one of the best starts to the day.

Much of the food we eat at the Anantara comes from Tra Que, a fresh-vegetable village on the outskirts of town. Anantara works with local gardeners here to source produce and offers guests guided tours of the plots in true produce-to-plate spirit.

CULINARY LESSONS

What isn't sourced from Tra Que, the hotel grows in small quantities on site, including peppermint, coriander and chillies, which we sample at the hotel's Spice Spoons cooking class. Held poolside in a semi-open pavilion, the relaxed class is a hands-on way to learn the fundamentals of preparing Vietnamese cuisine. We're taught to shred green papaya for the base of a salad and are given tips on how to balance elements of sour, bitter, sweet, salty and spicy in the dressing. We prepare spring rolls with herbs and noodles, before frying *bánh xèo*: prawn pancakes that we roll up with Vietnamese mint and bean shoots.

The hotel's rooms are bigger than most people's apartments, with a sunken lounge area and low-slung bed and terrazzo



TAKE OFF

BOOK IT NOW

Vietnam Airways has direct flights from Australia to Ho Chi Minh City, with onward connections to Danang (for Hoi An) and Quy Nhon. vietnamairline.travel

The Avani Quy Nhon's 63 rooms and suites have balconies overlooking a private beach – there's even a view of the sea from your shower. Public spaces, from the spa to the breezy restaurant and bar, come sans walls. When the weather is warm all year round and the outlook is of the ocean, there's no need for obstructions. minorhotels.com

Anantara Hoi An is an ideal base from which to explore Hoi An's Old Town – you can walk there in about 10 minutes or borrow a bike and ride in. The property's split-level rooms and suites open onto porches with daybeds, overlooking the river or a garden courtyard. There's a spa, five restaurants and bars and a pool. hoi-an.anantara.com

bathroom replete with a huge soaking tub. My patio overlooks the water and is the perfect place for an after-class 333, the beer of choice in these parts. It's not a sundowner though because that time of day is reserved for a river cruise and – as it's full moon – a lantern-making tutorial. Anantara's repurposed longboat is now used to take guests up the Thu Bon. While chugging upstream, we're shown how to assemble lanterns. Returning to the hotel, I find an auspicious red one has been placed in my room with a note inviting me to release it in a river ceremony to bring good fortune.

A DREAM RESORT COME TRUE

It clearly works, because the next day we're on our way south to Quy Nhon, known for its beach-blessed shoreline and wide boulevards. The Avani resort here overlooks one of Vietnam's most beautiful stretches of sand, which, in a country known for its expansive tropical coastline, is saying something. From the pool, I gaze out over the bruised evening sky, watching fishermen fight the waves in repurposed coconut baskets. The resort comes with a private beach – the setting for our lantern-lit meal one evening. Fresh squid chars on the barbecue, while oysters are shucked and prawns peeled. The rain holds off until the seafood has been devoured, but enormous drops soon send us running back to our rooms. I end the evening cocooned in a hanging wicker chair on my patio, watching the storm roll across the night sky.

The next day begins with yoga in the spa, set at one of the resort's highest points. It's hard to resist a treatment in one of the spa's semi-open suites afterwards.

Much less touristy than Hoi An, Quy Nhon's sleepy streets are home to some of the country's most beautiful Cham temples and Buddhist monuments. The city's wet market is also an eye-opening spectacle – we step over freshly gutted snakes and baskets of live frogs on our visit. But there are also piles of melons, mounds of fish and plenty of crabs.

Our floating, lunchtime pit stop farms the tasty crustaceans, which are stored in baskets hanging below the restaurant. There's no menu: we just point and choose the condiments. Moments later, platters arrive with crabs steamed with ginger and shallots. I pluck out the meat and, along with lettuce, herbs and noodles, create quite possibly the world's fanciest rice-paper roll – eaten in quite possibly the world's least-fancy restaurant. Here, it's all about the food, which is fresh and vibrant with just the right amount of bite. A bit like Vietnam on a plate, really. 🍜

VISIT If you love the fresh fragrance and flavours of Vietnamese cooking, head to mindfood.com/vietnamese for a round-up of our best recipes.