

HANOI, Vietnam

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

Motorbikes rule the roads and people live in tall, skinny houses, one-room wide.



First impressions of cities, like people, tend to stay with you. And so it was with my first visit to Vietnam. The next observation was that Hanoi looks old, very old, not just restored old. And rightly so. It turns 1000 next year and was spared from much of the wartime bombing.

The final opening surprise was that my fractured French would not get me very far. English has become the second language and everything American is in demand, including U.S. dollars which are accepted just about everywhere.

I checked in at one of the few

remaining French-style boutique hotels, the Hoabinh, at the edge of Hanoi's "Old Quarter." Built in 1926, the Hoabinh features French colonial furniture in high-ceiling spacious rooms. Best of all, my junior suite, including full breakfast, was under \$100 a night.

In fact, because of the poor global economy while I was there, some very nice hotels were offering rooms for as low as \$25. Since a typical restaurant meal can be about \$6, that would make Vietnam one of the few remaining bargain spots in this part of the world.

The Old Quarter is more gritty and lived-in than exotic. A hodgepodge of shops, sidewalk vendors and the famous Pho (Vietnamese soup) stalls have replaced the handicraft artisans of yesteryear. The area never sleeps--young women hop along with their trademark shoulder poles selling their wares or carting off something to market, older women squat over their sidewalk produce, men are repairing one thing or another, young children are simply at play.

Thirty-six streets comprise the Old Quarter, no two alike, no particular pattern or design. What you see today you may or may not get tomorrow.

As for the tall, thin houses, often referred to as "tubes," they were initially constructed that way to avoid taxes, which were based on the width of the frontage. So, today, they resemble children's blocks one atop the other, usually three or four floors high, two rooms to a floor, one behind the other.

And the Vietnamese have a tendency to put their best face forward, lavishly decorating the front, including upper balconies, and leaving the sides unfinished. Only the very rich do it all.

I was in Hanoi to attend a travel show known as the Asean Tourism Forum (ATF) and it was an agonizingly slow process to go by taxi

from my hotel to the Convention Center because of the motorbikes---literally millions of them---on the city streets.



In actuality, motorbikes control the roads, seemingly only allowing cars and other vehicles to use it as well. But only at their pace and conditions, as they surround vehicles like swarms of insects. Motorists are, in a sense, entombed and move with the flow.

Practically everyone in Hanoi owns a motorbike (the city has about 7 million residents) and many use it as an unlicensed taxi or touring vehicle in addition to personal

transportation. A number of tourism show attendees arrived and left on the back of a motorbike. So I gave it a try.

I made it back to my hotel in half the time a taxi would take, at one-tenth the cost--and ten thousand times more exciting! But once was clearly enough.

Hanoi does not abound with tourist attractions. A typical city tour will find you spending the bulk of your time at Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum, the former presidential palace, his living quarters, even his garages containing his original cars. A pagoda or two and lunch generally completes the tour.



A better way to get a feel for the city is to simply follow your nose and delve into one neighborhood after another with no particular game plan. Have a steaming bowl of Pho along the way, or an espresso at one of the numerous coffee houses that are springing up all over the city.

From Hanoi, we completed our "4-H" tour with stops at Halong Bay, Hue (Hoo-way) and Hoian (Hoy-ann).

Halong Bay, about a four-hour drive south of Hanoi, is Vietnam's undisputed No. 1 tourist attraction and has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Even though it is just now beginning to receive international exposure, Halong Bay can easily compare to Phuket and Phang Nga Bay in southern Thailand and the island of Langkawi off the northwest Malaysian coast.



There are about 2000 limestone islands jutting out of Halong Bay of various shapes and sizes. Many contain enormous caves and grottoes, and some of the larger islands support small fishermen villages. The Vietnamese have a colorful way of describing these jutting islands... "like the tips of drowning mountains."

Our next stop, Hue, situated in central Vietnam on the banks of the Perfume River, was once the nation's capital. Its main attractions are the sprawling Citadel grounds which contains the former palace and Vietnam's version of the Forbidden City, and the tombs of several emperors.

But other than the historical significance, Hue doesn't have a great deal of attractions for the average tourist. (It does boast of having the best food and most beautiful women in the country, however). The Hanoi to Saigon train, which runs through the city eight times daily, four each way, is often one of the day's highlights.

So I took the opportunity to have a massage after dinner that night at my hotel. The next morning at breakfast, a young waitress asked: "Did you sleep well, sir?" It was the massage girl on her day job.

There was no shortage of activities in our final stop, the ancient city of Hoi An, which has escaped the ravages of past

wars. During the 16th and 17th centuries, this was a popular port for merchants from Japan, China and India. Practically all of the buildings are intact.

Winding narrow streets take you past shops and restaurants of every description, a Chinese temple or two, a classical Japanese pagoda and covered bridge. The center of the city contains numerous silk shops where tailors promise to make the clothing of your choice overnight at bargain prices.

Hoian is a walker's and a shopper's delight. What Halong Bay is to beauty, Hoian is to simply enjoy.

Then it was back to Hanoi for a final night in the Old Quarter, a going-away bowl of Pho, and the long flight home. I took a taxi to the airport. Surrounded by a motorbike motorcade

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IF YOU GO:

Getting to Vietnam from North America is definitely not half the fun. Flying time alone from the east coast is about 21 hours. Toss in delays, time between flights etc. and it is much longer. It took a whopping 36 hours to go door-to-door, from my home in Montreal to the Hanoi front door.

Visas are necessary for North

Americans and can be obtained at your nearest Vietnam Embassy. They can also be obtained upon entry with a certified letter from an agency. For more information go to www.myvietnamvisa.com.

The climate varies greatly from north to south. The average temperature is between 20-30 Celsius but it is often 5-10 degrees colder in the north.

Drink only bottled water, bring a little light rain gear, but otherwise pack light. Dress is informal throughout Vietnam. Although many older residents still say Saigon, the official name of the city is Ho Chi Minh City. It's advisable to use the latter.

For more information on Vietnam, go to www.vietnamtourism.com. For the Hoabinh Hotel, www.hoabinhhotel.com

SIDEBAR

The Asean Tourism Forum (ATF) is a cooperative organization formed in 1981 to promote 10 southeast Asian nations as one large tourist destination. The annual event takes place each January at one of the member nations--Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam--in alphabetical order.