

Hanoi's Opera House is a scale replica of the Paris Opera's Palais Garnier



Haute Hanoi

BY DANIEL ALLEN

The Vietnamese capital is where colonial chic meets Asian avant-garde

Photo: Daniel J Allen

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Green Tangerine: French with a Vietnamese twist

For its intoxicating blend of history, humanity and haunting scenery, few Asian cities come close to Hanoi. Like the young oil painters encircling Hoan Kiem Lake, the buzzing metropolis mixes the headiest sights, sounds, smells and tastes from an overloaded palette into experiences that are as rich as they are unique.

"Hanoi is charming in so many ways", says resident Nguyen My Giang Huong, owner of the city's celebrated Green Tangerine restaurant. "There aren't many capitals with such fine architecture and landscapes, where your view of the sky isn't blocked by skyscrapers, where past and present create such a beautifully timeless mosaic. Of course, having great cuisine is also a major bonus."

Despite its association with the ravages of war, and legacy of colonial architecture, Hanoi is a city with one eye on the future.

Fruit sellers wearing conical bamboo hats meander past Louis Vuitton boutiques, while old women in black berets share park benches with teenage hipsters and their pop-filled iPods. Sixty percent of Vietnam's 80 million-plus inhabitants are younger than 30, and the youthful dynamism is palpable.

Hanoi's burgeoning economy (about 8 percent growth for the past three years) and

Shrimp salad at Ba Mien, Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel



Silken touch: Silk can be tailored at Kenly Silk

rising influx of tourists are collectively driving the city's hospitality, retail and entertainment sectors. Within the high-end market, visitors can choose from an ever-widening array of five-star accommodation, luxury retail and fine-dining options.

When it comes to selecting the quintessential Hanoi hotel, it's hard to look beyond the Sofitel Metropole. Steeped in history, this fin de siècle classic remains a favourite with travellers from around the globe and luminaries such as Charlie Chaplin, Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene had favourite rooms.

While the Sofitel Metropole is half-owned by the Vietnamese government, it's not hard to see a French hand at work in the more than 100-year-old hotel. From the vintage Citroëns parked outside to the haute cuisine offered by the Sofitel Metropole's Le Beaulieu restaurant, the Gallic touch lends a little je ne sais quoi.

A stone's throw from the Sofitel Metropole in Hanoi's French Quarter is the Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel, another good choice for those seeking to match top notch service with style. A seven-storey mock-colonial crescent, the Hilton Hanoi is modeled after the adjacent Hanoi Opera House, itself a downsized replica of the Paris Opera's Palais Garnier.

Guests can escape the humidity in the rooftop pool while taking in the architecture of the Opera House, while those in search of some Vietnamese fine dining should check out the hotel's Ba Mien restaurant.

There's a saying in Vietnam that Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is the belly of Vietnam, while the northern capital, Hanoi, is the head. Anatomical associations aside, Hanoi has plenty of dining options, offering everything from streetside sweet-and-sour soup to the finest international cuisine.

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TRAVEL

A good place to start is the Green Tangerine in the city's Old Quarter. Housed in a beautifully restored silk shop dating back to 1928, the restaurant's intimate courtyard is a perfect place to escape the multitude of vendors and vespas choking the narrow streets outside.

Nguyen describes the constantly changing menu as "French cuisine with a Vietnamese twist. The emphasis here is on fine and healthy dining," she says. "A lot of our dishes are poached or steamed and we incorporate a lot of local herbs and spices." The scallops with apricot seeds are a particular favourite, while those with a sweet tooth should try the heavenly chocolate truffle fritters.

Another Hanoi restaurant that constantly wins rave reviews is Bobby Chinn, owned by the extrovert namesake celebrity chef who now has his own television show and cookery book. The restaurant, serving up



Seasonal martini at Bobby Chinn (left)

Apricot Gallery on Hang Bong street (right)

creative California-Asian fusion dishes in a great location beside Hoan Kiem Lake, matches style with substance.

Kick off your Bobby Chinn experience with a signature seasonal martini followed by seared scallops, the succulent filet mignon and indulgent dessert platter.

"We stock 120 wines at the right tempera-

ture and 15 brands of chilled vodka," says restaurant manager Nguyen Van Hoach. "We also have a great tapas menu for those who want to hang out rather than dine."

Vietnamese are serious about their coffee. Since its introduction by French missionaries in the mid-19th century, coffee has become one of the country's major exports and a whole



café culture has grown up around it. Hanoi residents often recommend Au Lac Café for a fine cup (and great chicken noodles).

Hanoi is also a shopper's paradise. The city's Old Quarter, dating back to the 13th century, is a retail rabbit warren, offering everything from shoes, silkwear and antique furniture to ceramics, lacquerware and contemporary

art. Street names start with the word hang (merchandise), followed by the item traditionally sold on that street.

Probably the best known shopping item in Hanoi is silk, with very reasonable prices and tailoring services. Kenly Silk on Hang Gai and the Song Boutique on Nha Tho both offer silkwear for men and women, while the La Casa boutiques on Nha Tho and Xuan Dieu also have homewares and objets d'art by long-term Italian resident Valentina Bottari.

Lacquerware is perhaps Vietnam's most traditional handicraft, renowned for its fine workmanship, durability and design. The Old Quarter contains myriad lacquerware shops, with the Artcen company on Hang Gai popular for its wide range of quality products.

Just along from Hang Gai street is Hang Bong street, where many of Hanoi's best art galleries are located. Vietnamese art is flourishing and outlets such as the Apricot and Mai Galleries

on Hang Bong and the Green Palm Gallery on Hang Gai feature contemporary pieces in oil, gouache and watercolour, as well as traditional paintings by older Vietnamese artists.

Gallic touches at the Sofitel Metropole Hotel



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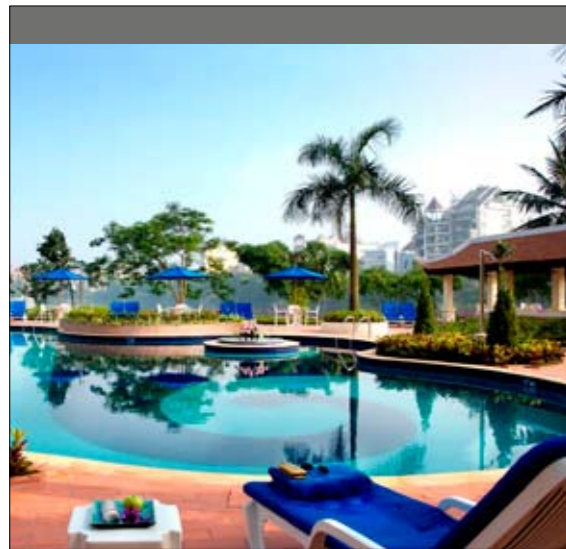
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Photos: Above: Julian Abram/Wainwright. Right: Daniel Allen.

Soup with the lot at Au Lac Cafe



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