

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

Here's a sure sign that Vietnam is ready to welcome the world: It has attracted top hoteliers. From north to south, a string of five-star hotels have opened to host visitors in the country's most popular cities.

The Vietnamese, according to a January 2007 Gallup International poll, are the most optimistic people in the world. And why not? A rapidly developing infrastructure, a surge of foreign investors, political stability, a populace rapidly gaining English fluency, cultural attractions, a favorable exchange rate, unspoiled beaches and knockout cuisine deliver a winning vacation destination.

Originally under China's Han Dynasty and then French rule, Vietnam bears the legacy of many. I begin my exploration in Saigon, or as it is now less lyrically known, Ho Chi Minh City, at the posh Park Hyatt. Located in District 1 near the Opera House, the French colonial-style hotel is a genteel city enclave with a decidedly residential feel. The lobby boasts original artwork and rooms are outfitted with teak floors, four-poster beds, dark plantation shutters and marble baths.

At Square One, the hotel's visually and gastronomically stunning East/West restaurant, my table is filled with sumptuous dishes of succulent rib-eye and luscious Waygu beef, grilled oysters, pomelo and shrimp salad, spring rolls wrapped in mustard leaves and cherry crême brûlée—a feast. The next day begins with a steaming bowl of pho, the national soup, at the copious breakfast buffet. Then I walk over to Ben Thanh Market, where Brangelina once made a stir by arriving on a motorbike and buying souvenirs from the vendors.

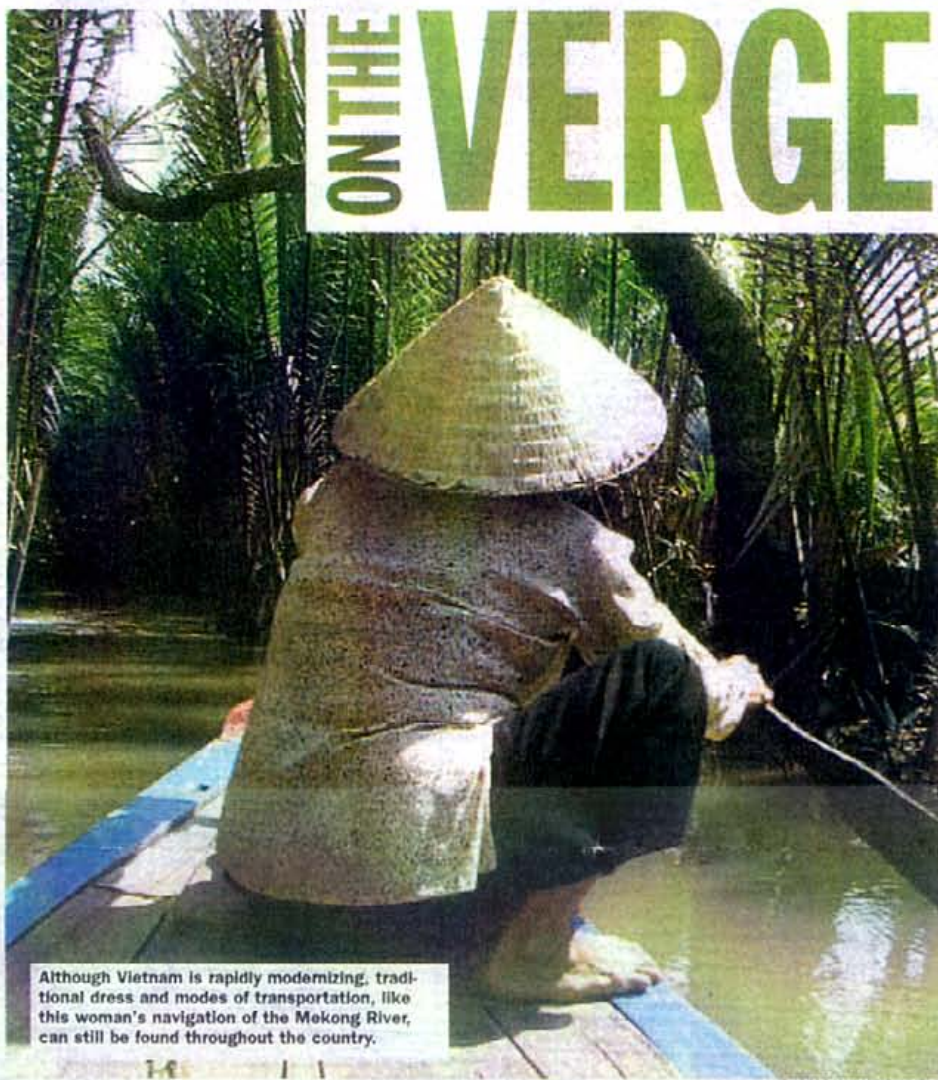
Another sign of a go-go economy? Communist-era housing blocks are being razed and skyscrapers are going up in their place. I walk past the construction to the Reunification Palace, where time seems to have stood still—its 1966 interiors are retro in the extreme. But it's the war command room, with its huge maps and communications equipment, that I find most interesting.

For a street-level view of the city, you can't beat a ride on a cyclo (or rickshaw), as the driver peddles furiously through a sea of motorbikes. Many of the commuters wear scarves over their faces to protect them from the pollution and the intense sun. I also spy some women wearing opera-length gloves that rise nearly to their shoulders.

The following morning I join a tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels, located an hour and a half away from Ho Chi Minh City. The sophisticated underground network was used in the 1960s by the Vietcong fighting the Americans. We start with a lecture and then head out into the jungle to see the tunnels. I also check out the souvenir bullet lighters, pens and rubber sandals, and watch a demonstration of rice paper-making. I'd wondered if there would be sadness in the soil here, but, instead, it's the scent of capitalism I detect.

# VIETNAM

## ON THE VERGE



Although Vietnam is rapidly modernizing, traditional dress and modes of transportation, like this woman's navigation of the Mekong River, can still be found throughout the country.

PHOTOS/SUZANNE WRIGHT



Street Scenes: Motorbikes and rickshaws zoom through traffic in Ho Chi Minh City (left), while a street vendor prepares a spicy sauce.

### IF YOU GO

#### WHEN TO GO

Vietnam's weather varies from north to south, so consult a travel guide for specific forecasts during your travel. For general information, visit [www.vietnamtourism.com](http://www.vietnamtourism.com).

#### WHERE TO STAY

**Park Hyatt:** [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com)  
**Evason Hideaway:** [www.sixsenses.com](http://www.sixsenses.com)  
**Metropole Hotel:** [www.softel.com](http://www.softel.com)

Nha Trang, Vietnam's No. 1 beach resort, is next up on my itinerary. I split my time between Ana Mandara and its sister resort, the exclusive Evason Hideaway.

The former is packed with many British, Spanish, German and American travelers. When it was built, the hotel was an oasis.

But the city is a victim of its own success and the constant bleat of motorbikes grates on my nerves.

The weather is windy and overcast, so instead of lying on the beach, I take a cooking class, where I learn to make hand rolls and spring rolls. Our group of 10 has a blast

laughing and noshing our way through the lesson. Later, at the gorgeous outdoor spa, I receive a massage from a woman whose tiny size belies her strength. The sun sets, the waves thunder and I feel blissed out.

In Hanoi, the wasp-waisted girls in traditional long tunics, *áo dài*, seem to float down the tree-lined boulevards past the historic architecture of the colonial capital. The graceful Metropole Hotel, with its white façade, green shutters, wrought iron flourishes and lush courtyard, also captures the Indochine feel of pre-war Hanoi. Since 1901, heads of state, celebrities, artists and authors have stayed in this landmark hotel (request a room in the old wing for period atmosphere). I stroll over to Hoan Kiem Lake, the city's nerve center, and cross a red wooden bridge to Ngoc Son Temple.

Streets are the soul of Vietnam, so I wind my way through the Old Quarter, which has a 2,000-year history. The 36 streets are named for craftspeople, like silversmiths, locksmiths, silk weavers and marble carvers. Today, it is a maddening maze of tourists, cycle drivers, cars and motorbikes, all competing for a patch of asphalt.

The concierge arranges for me to spend the afternoon touring the city in the hotel's spiffy navy 1953 Citroën, which draws curious stares as we travel the streets. We drive past Embassy Row (government buildings are yellow with green shutters) on the way to the National Fine Arts Museum. It is hushed and empty. Entire rooms of the gracious restored colonial building are devoted to lacquer, woodblocks and folk art, though the most intriguing piece may be the many-armed 11th-century Goddess of Mercy.

At the Temple of Literature, Vietnam's first university, 82 stone tablets mounted on stone turtles display the names of various scholars. The imposing granite and concrete Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum (modeled on Lenin's tomb) is closed during my visit, but I witness the changing of the white-uniformed guards.

I visit the infamous Hoa Lo Prison, also known as the "Hanoi Hilton," where Sen. John McCain was famously held. Two-thirds of the prison have been demolished to make way for an apartment and office complex, but the guillotines and other torture devices still cause me to shudder.

My final excursion is to Ha Long Bay, a three-hour drive from Hanoi. Along the way, we pass farmers in rice paddies and water buffaloes pulling plows. Memorialized by poets for centuries, Ha Long means "Bay of the Descending Dragon" and consists of more than 1,800 limestone outcroppings in the Gulf of Tonkin. I board a wood junk for a three-hour cruise through the spectacular scenery.

The islands look like ziggurats as they come into sight; the misty fog only adds to the lyrical atmosphere. As a delicious multi-course lunch of crabs, steamed shrimp, squid salad and butter fish is served, the captain cuts the motor and we slowly ply the waters. Modern Vietnam is many things, but suspended in time on this peaceful afternoon, this is the Vietnam of countless reveries. **SP**