



As Kaushik Mitra immerses into the Vietnamese way of life, he shares his story

At home in Vietnam

It has been three months since I moved to Vietnam to take up a new role as CFO of a JV between Suntory and PepsiCo. In between, I have had the chance to travel across the country, and this is a good time to pen down this 'Vietnam Travelogue' for my friends, family and other travel enthusiasts. In this first of a two-part travelogue, I will cover the country's two major cities: Ho Chi Minh City (the erstwhile Saigon) and Hanoi. In part two, we will discover the famous beach resorts and islands of this amazing country of 90 million, bordered by China to the north, Laos to the north-west, Cambodia to the south-west, and Malaysia across the South China Sea to the south-east.

No travelogue is complete without a historical context, so I will provide a brief background. Vietnam has a rich and chequered history dating back to 257 BC. In 111 BC, it was subsumed by China, and stayed under Chinese rule for a millennium, until Ngô Quyền defeated the Chinese forces at Bạch Đằng River in 938 AD. Successive dynasties flourished before the French colonised the country, bringing it into the fold of French Indochina in 1887. Following the Japanese occupation of the 1940s, the Vietnamese people rebelled against French rule, finally expelling them in 1954. Thereafter, the country was divided into two rival states, North and South Vietnam. Conflict between the two was intense, with heavy intervention by the United States during what came to be known as the Vietnam War. The war ended with North Vietnam's victory in 1975, followed by re-unification under a communist government. However, it remained impoverished and politically isolated. In 1986, the government began a series of economic and political reforms that laid the way for Vietnam's re-integration into the world economy. By 2000, it had established diplomatic relations with all countries, including America. It joined the WTO in 2007, and is today one of



the world's fastest-growing economies. The future looks exciting for this brave, hard-working and self-respecting Nation.

Getting There and Basic Travel Tips

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the commercial capital, and Hanoi, the political capital, are both well connected to the rest of Asia. To get to either city, one normally takes a connecting flight from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. Domestic air connectivity is very good, with the national carrier Vietnam Airlines providing

frequent connections between major cities – Hanoi and Haiphong in the North, HCMC and the Cantho in the South, and Danang in the centre. Other tourist destinations, such as the Mekong Delta, Halong Bay, and the beach resort city of Nha Trang, have good connectivity with Hanoi and HCMC.

Vietnam's currency is the Dong, and one USD currently trades at about 22,400 Dong. For most of the year, the climate is either warm or wet across the country. The North sees a mild winter, while the South basically has two seasons: summer, and rainy. The Vietnamese people are warm and friendly, and the country is very tourist-friendly. Language can be a bit of a challenge, but most tour companies have English-speaking guides. Two frequently used phrases are 'Xin chào' ('Hello') and 'Cam On' ('Thank you'). But don't worry too much about the language: one can get around without too much difficulty in the major tourist sites. When thinking of Vietnam, four things typically come to mind: pho (noodle soup), ao dai (a long traditional dress), palm-leaf conical hats (a must-buy) and the Cyclo, a simple three-wheeled vehicle that takes you back in time in the Old Quarters of Hanoi. Don't



miss any of these four.

Bustling Ho Chi Minh City

HCMC, or Saigon as it still sometimes called, is Vietnam's largest and most 'happening' city. I am based there and love its vibrant, sometime chaotic personality. HCMC has something to offer to everyone. If you are interested in history, there is the War Remnants Museum and the Cu Chi Tunnels to see. If you are a shopaholic, the city has a wide spectrum of experiences, from the Traditional Ben Thanh market to the modern Vincom Centre Mall. HCMC is also a gastronomic delight for the foodie. District 1, which is the downtown area, has a myriad choice of restaurants offering a wide range of cuisines, from delicious local food, to Italian, Indian, Lebanese, Japanese, Thai, and Korean – not to mention the fast food chains. Cafés abound, and coffee-drinking is a favourite Vietnamese pastime. In addition to local coffee chains like Trung Nguyen Coffee, there are quite a few Starbucks outlets. If you are a party animal, Saigon's vibrant nightlife will not disappoint. After the sun goes down, there's plenty to do, whether you're looking for a quiet drink in a cool space, some live music, some serious clubbing, or an all-nighter.

My recommendation for a day out in the city would start with the museums. You can choose between

the War Remnants Museum, the Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, and the Vietnam History Museum. If history is your thing, do all three. The War Remnants Museum richly captures the conflict with the French and the Americans. It has rich exhibits and data on biological warfare and weaponry, and in-depth statistics on Vietnam's armies. The courtyard houses a great collection of tanks, aircraft and war machinery. The Museum of Ho Chi Minh City has previously been a Governor's Palace and a Committee building. Today it hosts a vast collection of weaponry and memorabilia from the country's revolutionary struggles. Finally, the Vietnam History Museum has an amazing array of ceramics and arms. There are photographs, clothes and household objects, some dating back as far as the 1700s.

Museums done, it's time to crawl through the extensive, 500-kilometre-long network of tunnels used by the Vietcong in the 1960s to fight American soldiers. The Cu Chi tunnels are a popular tourist attraction, but certainly not for those who suffer from claustrophobia. Next stop on the city tour is the Notre Dame Cathedral. Located in downtown HCMC, it was built between 1863 and 1880 by the French, and reaches a height of 60 meters. A regular stop for people who seek out old-world charm, the Cathedral is at its most beautiful in daylight, and is a hot favourite for couples who come here to take their wedding photographs and videos.

Now for some shopping. No visit to Ho Chi Minh City is complete without experiencing the chaos and madness of the Ben Thanh Marketplace. Bang in the centre of town, it is the city's biggest and most famous indoor market. Here you can find anything under the sun, from routine

souvenirs to silk products and an array of delicious Vietnamese food. There are countless aisles full of vendors, with their products filling up just about every available space. This is the place to buy all your souvenirs, and also to sample local delicacies, but prices are inflated, so you need to bargain hard. Start at 50 per cent of the quoted price and walk away if the vendor does not show interest. Normally, they come around, and you get a good deal after going through the paces.

For those with a religious bent of mind, do visit the Emperor Jade Pagoda. A few blocks north-west of the Botanical Gardens, the Pagoda, or Chua Phuoc Hai, was built by the city's Cantonese community at the start of the twentieth century. If you visit just one temple in town, make it this one, with its exquisite panels of carved gilt woodwork, and its collection of weird and wonderful deities, both Taoist and Buddhist. A statue of the Jade Emperor lords it over the main hall's central altar, sporting an impressive moustache. Surrounding him is a retinue of similarly moustachioed followers. Finally, as the day winds down, it's time to unwind at the Twenty-Three September Park. Inside, you will find various gazebos, an amphitheatre and a small playground for children, as well as plenty of room for exercise and lounging. The park becomes particularly active at night, when it fills up with locals who sit along the ground and buy drinks and snacks from vendors who line the park's edge. During special events and holidays, especially the Tet festival, it hosts concerts, festivals and flower markets. If you still have the energy and are inclined, I would recommend getting a flavour of the vibrant night-life, ranging from Jazz bars to dance clubs, and much more.

All in all, I would recommend 2-3 days in Ho-Chi Minh City to explore the place and soak in the sights and sounds of a bustling city that strikes a unique balance between



modernity and old-world French colonial style.

Historic Hanoi

Hanoi is the perfect foil to the hustle and bustle of HCMC. With a population of four million and a more genteel style than its southern counterpart, Hanoi is both the political and cultural capital of Vietnam, and also its heart and soul. A great place to explore on foot, there is a lot to see and do here. Hanoi lies on the banks of the Red River, some 100 kilometres from its mouth. Human settlement here dates back to the 3rd century BC. This charming city has aged well, preserving the Old Quarter, monuments, and colonial architecture, while making room for modern developments alongside. Lakes, parks, shady boulevards and more than 600 temples and pagodas add to its charm, and the city is easily explored by taxi. My wife and I made a weekend trip there recently, and it was a memorable experience.

We started with a Cyclo tour in the late afternoon. Cyclos are similar to the cycle-rickshaws that used to ply the streets of Kolkata until a few years ago. It is a wonderful way to soak in the sights and sounds of Hanoi at a leisurely pace. Time stood still for the one hour that our Cyclo weaved in and out of narrow streets in the Old Quarter, each of which housed a unique market. My mind raced back to the crowded streets of Burra Bazaar in Kolkata, or the melee of humanity in the narrow lanes around Chandni Chowk. One could not but admire the navigation skills of the Cyclo driver as we threaded through the bustle of two-wheelers, cars and pedestrians without a single collision.

Next on the itinerary was a food tour. Hanoi is famous for its varied street food, but what I highly recommend you try are bun ca, cha ca la vong, and bun cha. 'Bun' simply means rice-vermicelli noodles, and 'Ca' means fish. If bun isn't to your liking, you can also get banh da – dried flat-noodles flavoured

with tea powder – instead. Cha ca va long is small fish fillets marinated in galangal and turmeric and sautéed with dill. At the sweeter end of things, you must try the café sua da (iced coffee with sweetened condensed milk), or the trendier sua chua café, which is iced coffee mixed with tangy frozen yogurt.

The evening ended with a memorable water puppet show at the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre. This world-famous theatre has its roots in an art form that dates back to the 11th century. The tradition of water puppets stems from rural Vietnam: when the paddy fields would flood, villagers entertained themselves standing in waist-deep water with puppet shows. Tickets are normally sold-out on weekends but our guide managed to get us front-row seats. A Vietnamese orchestra playing traditional music on drums, wooden bells, horns, bamboo flutes and cymbals, accompanies each performance. This is a must-do for anyone visiting Hanoi, and my advice is to book tickets in advance.

The next day we enjoyed a leisurely half-day city tour before catching the evening flight back to HCMC. The tour started with a visit to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the One Pillar (or Dien Huu) Pagoda. Building work on the Pagoda began in 1049, and near it is a Bodhi tree gifted by India's former President Dr Rajendra Prasad during a visit to Hanoi. Our next stop was the Museum of Ethnology. We were very keen to see this unique indoor-outdoor museum – which showcases the clothes, tools and homes of Vietnam's 54 different ethnic tribes – and we weren't disappointed. Outdoors, it has dwellings



that have either been preserved in their original state, or have been remade. We walked through different homes, including a 'Tay' stilt house, a half-stilt-half-earth 'Yao' house, a 'Hanhi' house made of beaten walls, a 'Giarai' tomb, and a 'Se Dang' communal house, to name a few. The star attraction, though, was the towering peak of a thatched 'Banhar' communal home. 19 metres high and built in 2003 by 42 villagers from Kon Rbang village in the Central Highlands, it is a symbol of skill and strength.

Our tour ended with a visit to the Temple of Literature. Built in 1070, and dedicated to Confucius, this was Vietnam's first university. It functioned for over 700 years, until 1779, educating the country's noblemen and royalty, its mandarins and other elite. Graduates would have their names engraved on the steles that sit on top of large stone turtles inside the temple. Consisting of five landscaped courtyards, it includes two gardens, a lotus pond, and a shrine to Confucius. We returned to Ho Chi Minh City after a wonderful weekend in Hanoi, filled with memories of a city with real character, and steeped in heritage. ■



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