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Wanderlust

with The Boho Chica

Hanging in Hanoi: Culture in the Old Quarter



Standing across the street from my hotel in Hanoi, I was struck by panic. With my backpack strapped on, I watched helplessly as the raging flood of motorbikes showed no signs of slowing down.

Ok, how hard can this be, I'll just...

Before I knew it, I was on the street keeping up with the swift zigzag movements of Han, my taxi driver who was tugging onto my right sleeve and expertly weaving through the moving motorbikes.

"This how you cross road in Hanoi," he smiled. Pocketing the fare, he pointed towards the entrance of my hotel. A few seconds later, he was racing across the street back to his taxi with the graceful gait of a feline. I had to admit, my introduction to Vietnam's vibrant capital was anything but ordinary.

Getting lost in the Old Quarter

Strolling along the backstreets of the Old Quarter, the first thing that caught my eye was the large conical hat on the tiny

head of a woman who squatted at a street corner, selling fruits. She almost caught me staring but I quickly averted my gaze to the pretty silk dress that hung behind her in a boutique window.

A few steps away, another woman invited me to watch as she fried *banh ran*, golden balls of rice flour and dunked them in sticky sugar syrup. Her trick had worked; enticed, I was on my way a few minutes later with its gooey goodness for company.



Turning around the next corner, I was on *Hang Dau*, a street that was resplendent in a riot of color and the buzz of shoppers who leaned over rows of Nike trainers, flip-flops, and sparkly pumps, examining them carefully. Armed with the mission of finding myself a good pair of hiking shoes, I shopped around, finally walking away with my purchase of \$17 after fifteen minutes of persuasive haggling.

People watching at Hoan Kiem Lake

Barely a few minutes' walk from the shopping area, I settled down on a bench by the tranquil Hoan Kiem Lake. It appeared to be popular for social meetings, outdoor workouts and dates. A few benches away, a teenaged couple held hands and giggled, whispering sweet nothings. A focused redhead jogged along the perimeter, earphones plugged in, her ponytail swinging behind her. Reflected in the water of the lake was a bright red bridge connecting the shore to the 18th century Ngoc Son Temple.

"Where you from?," a meek voice asked. I looked up to see another tiny face in a large hat. With eager eyes, the woman thrust a greeting card into my hand, "One dollar only." I flipped it open. An elaborate pop-up of a woman on a bicycle sprung out at me. She wore the same conical hat that I was beginning to love. "I'll take three," I replied. She smiled, deep lines appearing next to her eyes as she reached into her bag.

Folklore and legends at the Water Puppet Show

Across the street from Hoan Kiem Lake, I arrived at the Thang Long Theater, just in time for the Water Puppet Show. Traditionally, puppetry was performed in the rice paddies to celebrate the annual harvest. I managed to squeeze into the child-size seats, even as other (taller) tourists struggled. The lights dimmed and the show began.

The painted wooden puppets played, danced, squirted water and lit fires on the surface of

a pool to traditional folk music. Each act was based on village folklore and though there wasn't a literal translation, the show was easy to follow. The crowd got noticeably excited and burst into laughter with the grand appearance of a dragon that chased the puppets around the pool.

Dining at a Street Kitchen

It's rightly said that if you want to taste the best that a cuisine has to offer, then follow the locals and grab a seat at a place where there aren't any signs in English. "We like to eat on the street," Anna, my hotel receptionist had told me that morning. And the street kitchens had plenty of character; a group of middle-aged women and another that looked like Hanoi's version of One Direction were just some of the patrons in the stall I'd picked.

Pho (noodle soup with meat and herbs) seemed to be popular, with at least one bowl on every table. A few minutes later, precariously perched on a tiny plastic stool, it wasn't only the hearty *Pho ga* (chicken noodle soup) I relished, but also the delightful cacophony of excited banter, intense debates and drunken brawls.

The Old Quarter is Hanoi's famous shopping district selling everything from tailor-made dresses and suits, jewelry, and handicrafts to trekking gear. If you want to shop, remember to bring a map. Getting lost in the maze of alleys (like I did) isn't a bad idea either. Historically, the Old Quarter was believed to be a network of 36 streets, each specializing in a specific trade such as medicines or textiles. In the early 13th century, the merchants who set up shop on each street came from the same village, giving each street its identity and a dedicated religious shrine.

