

Lost in Hanoi

As Hanoi is touted to be a new hip third-world destination, one reporter decides to get lost amid the city's older streets. The beauty Julia Cooke finds in the city's old quarter is of a decidedly subtler sort.

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It's 9am on my first morning in Hanoi and I can't bring myself to step off the curb of my guesthouse into the cacophony of the old quarter. It's not that the foot traffic is moving too quickly for me to join, it's just that the sensory stimulation is so enjoyable from the safety of my front step that I have no motivation to move. Thick cables of electric wire drape in clusters across a street buzzing with motorscooter traffic. Store canopies herald the arrival of products I can't decipher and women walk the streets with yokes balanced over their shoulders carrying baskets laden with leafy green vegetables or tangerines. There's a dull, rhythmic pounding sound coming from somewhere on my right, and curiosity finally drives me to step over and find out that it is a meat cleaver hitting a fillet of beef atop a thick board as a woman prepares the street food she will soon sell. That's why I finally start walking.

Hanoi is the ancient capital and cultural epicenter of Vietnam. Today, it gets attention for its nascent but potent contemporary art scene and wealth of culinary options. But the city retains a mystical feeling, especially in the winter; it's more pronounced than in fast-paced Saigon or sleepy imperial city Hué. Hanoi feels like it has secrets. There's the inconspicuous passageway just off of downtown Hung Khoan street that leads back to an expansive Buddhist complex dating from 1899 with altars and long corridors partitioned into different areas for respecting various deities and ancestors. Or the upper floors of Highway 4, a bar and restaurant just outside of the old quarter specializing in flavored rice wine and catfish salad rolls. If you venture up a set

of steep and crooked unmarked stairs at the back of the restaurant's bottom floor, a tatami-seating dining room and atmospheric rooftop bar awaits. For tourists who like the thrill of the chase as much as the find itself, Hanoi is an ideal place to explore.

The old quarter is the city's living room, kitchen, pantry, and front doorstep all at once. It's where commerce reigns, where objects and money change hands, where people go to get things done. Individual streets specialize in different wares, owing to the fact that worker's guilds for different industries once reigned over each of their individual alleys; hence the old quarter's historic nickname, the "36 streets" for the 36 guilds. Each street specialized in different products: bamboo mats here, paper products there. While today it's not as rigid, most streets are structured by the products stores sell. Smells alternate by street and time of day: In the mornings, the ambient smell is heavy on food scents wafting from the women crouching in doorways to pound meat and mix it into a fragrant pho broth, and in the afternoon, exhaust dominates the bouquet. In between, notes of sweet vinegar, metal-cutting, roasting coconut oil and leaded exhaust waft my way.

Navigating the streets that tend toward unruliness is an exercise in frustration, when they're not ordered or spaced or straight like in newer quarters of the city. The streets are jammed tight with motorscooters five abreast and herds of locals and tourists walking around. Getting lost is much more enjoyable, meandering and checking the map periodically to find out how far you've drifted.

On my second morning in Hanoi, after discovering that I can read the street names quite easily in recognizable letters, this is just what I do. Modern Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet, known as *quoc ngu*, with some additional, accented letters. Developed in the 17th century by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, *quoc ngu* wasn't widely used until the 19th century, when French

colonizers wanted to break commonalities with the Chinese and encouraged the use of the western alphabet. *Quoc ngu* doesn't make Vietnamese any more understandable to Romance language-speakers, but it does make it seem like it might be. And it means that wanderers from the Western hemisphere can rest assured that no matter how far they walk from home, they can find where they are on a map in letters they can understand.

So without looking at what street I am turning on to or off of, I hang a right onto what I see is the spice street. Fragrance wafts towards me. There are bags of assorted gingers, chilies, dried fruits, and what a shopkeeper tells me are worms in pantomime, by wiggling her finger and picking her fingers along her arm — or they could be larvae, I can't tell the difference. The smells change by street. In one store, a rich red wood counter with blue buckets labeled with masking tape scrawled over with beautiful-looking words line the back shelves. Barks and wood-chips are piled in the buckets, each a different size and texture. Three old ladies sitting in the back of the shop nod at me as I lean over the counter to smell from them. They don't seem to care. Other shops simply display their goods in huge, transparent plastic bags. There are six-kilogram bags of small dried mushrooms at a corner store, two centimeter-thick rolls of cinnamon bark, dried squid and even seahorses at others.

It's hard to walk around the old quarter for all of the scooters parked with one wheel up on the curb and one in the street. It's a very small person who can squeeze between storefront and motorcycle, so many, including me, walk in the street. I make a turn and come across the sewing street. People pore over bags of buttons, zippers, lace, and belt buckles ostensibly by Dolce + Gabbana, Roberto Cavalli, Dior, and even Chloe. I rifle through a pattern book in which the pictures don't match the patterns in the back. Along the main street, clothing vendors sell counterfeits so outlandish as to almost be tongue-in-cheek appropriations of mainstream

American and European fashion. A chunky blue knit sweater, looking like what half of the middle school students wandering the halls today like to wear, has a tag that reads “1892 Mercrombie + Life New York.” I can visualize it as part of a contemporary art installation, tacked to a gallery wall as a comment on today’s generic consumer culture. A lingerie shop features ladies underwear strapped into packs of 5 and 10 by rubber bands, the piles of them reaching far over my head.

Towels hang on a street corner in the ground-floor shop of what looks like a house from the French Colonial period. It’s slim, one of Hanoi’s renowned “tube houses.” In the old quarter, land taxes were levied based on the width of property at the street,. As a result, parceled land is miniscule at the street but stretches back into the middle of the block. (Even in the countryside, recently-built houses tower three meters wide, three stories tall and the equivalent of half a city block deep, their bare concrete walls not flanked by any other space.) Here in Hanoi, the historic tube houses have been renovated by owners in different time periods. It’s an unpredictable mix, the tiny houses slammed together in cacophony like some crazy composer putting together Mozart, Russian avant-garde and Astor Piazzola into a big, mish-mashed symphony. The beautiful variations on window grates are what catch my eye: the ironwork that protects the windows from the street ranges from ornate to simple blends Asian and French motifs. I want to steal one and install it in my garden, an accidental *objet d’art*.

Instead, I am almost tempted to purchase a lovely fleur-de-lis patterned beach towel which I am certain will unravel at its first good washing, but am distracted by the glittery packaging on the buckets of wrapped chocolate bonbons across the street. Christmas has just passed and Tet, the lunar new year, which the Vietnamese celebrate with fervor, is around the corner. The candies are packaged in red and gold wrappings that multitask for the two holidays.

I approach a candy store like a child, trying to ask the shopkeeper how much it would cost if I wanted one candy from each of the 20-odd buckets she has out front. There are boxes of chocolates with names like Lovely, Merci and Flaver lined up two meters high against her wall. We're ineffectually using hand gestures until two young women who take English at the local university begin to translate for me. They speak quite well, and the more outgoing of the two, who tells me to just call her Jewel, explains to me that "everybody comes to the Old Quarter for business. They buy or sell wholesale." She says that the shopkeeper will sell me one of each candy for 2,000 dong (about 1 peso) per piece, but as soon as she and her friend wander off, the proprietress shoos me away, signing that she only sells wholesale.

Around here, the street sounds are acute. Car and moto horns are used liberally, and they come in all different tones: 1-2-3 shrill beeps, bleating wavering wails, quacking sounds, musical tones, and the not-so-musical. Most of the time they prevent the crashes and bumps that become crashes, but when they do happen, they come with arguments over whose fault each accident was. I'm consistently surprised that there aren't more crashes, considering the impossibly large loads I see in the compact streets of the old quarter: An army-uniformed guy on a vespa with an old PC monitor in his lap, a man with a cluster of helium balloons four times his size trailing behind him. One man tips to the side, falling over with his load, then bounces up and unstraps a box from the back of his moto. Delivery.

At this point, I am lost. The dazed-looking tourists who wander the main streets with their Lonely Planet Vietnam books clutched in their hands, moving in different directions on the same old quarter walking tour, have disappeared.

So after my candy store rebuke, I wander to the stationery street and stumble across the restaurant I'd been meaning to stop into for lunch. I marvel at the serendipity and sit down to a

steaming pot of *cha ca*, a fish dish which is the only thing on the menu at the French-sounding, centuries-old Cha Ca La Vong. The frying fish comes to me in a small aluminum stir fry pan atop a small fire, and I am told to toss the vegetables and noodles into the pot, let it fry for a minute, and eat. It is delicious.

It's among American gallerist Suzanne Lecht's favorite restaurants, too. Lecht moved to Hanoi in the early 1990s after picking up a magazine with an article on the city, and the Hanoi's accidental, elegant, old-world beauty continues to mesmerize her. "I saw a photo of two bearded old men, sipping tea in front of a crumbling wall in this decaying, ancient beauty. For me, [that photo was] the epitome of the beauty of life," she says. Lecht established the Art Vietnam contemporary art gallery among the Old Quarter's 36 streets, but moved into a larger space slightly further away two years ago. Art Vietnam is among the top established venues in a city that's proclaimed to be the one of the next hot cities, with today's vogue for finding quality art in developing countries, for contemporary art aficionados.

As Hanoi's downtown gets hipper—just visit Art Vietnam, the Mai Gallery or Highway 4 to for a dose of it—the city will see a new type of cool-seeking tourist. Trendy denizens of the world's cosmopolitan cities will visit in greater numbers. But if the Old Quarter has maintained its frenetic place at the center of things in Hanoi, chances are, some things will stay the same, too.

Where to stay:

Sofitel Metropole Hanoi: The city's most luxurious and historical hotel still holds sway over swanky visitors.

15 Ngo Quyen Street; Tel: 844-826-6919; sofitel.com; Rooms from \$275 USD a night plus taxes.

Where to eat:

Cha Ca La Vong: Fried fish, and fried fish only, with fresh herbs and noodles.

14 Cha Ca St; Tel: (+84-4) 825-3929 (lunch for two about \$6 USD)

Highway 4: Quick, traditional Vietnamese food and local rice wines.

5 Han Tre St; Tel: (+84 4) 3926-0639 (dinner and drinks for two about \$15 USD)

Verticale: Upscale French-Vietnamese fusion food in a 1930s townhouse.

19 Ngo Van So St., Tel: (+84-4) 3944-6317 (dinner for two about \$50 USD)

For up-to-date Hanoi restaurant reviews, go to stickyrice.typepad.com, a local foodie blog that will result in a mile-long to-do list.

What to do:

Apart from aimlessly wandering the city's old quarter and hitting requisite tourist traps, visit two top galleries for a dose of contemporary art.

Art Vietnam

7 Nguyen Khac Nhu; Tel: (84-4) 927-2349

Mai Gallery

113 Hang Bong street; Tel: (84-4) 3938-0568