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HANOI HOTSPOTS DELIVER ON FLAVOUR

ACCESSIBILITY is all when a country is looking to attract more high-spending international tourists. Jetstar launched new flight services to Vietnam in May, igniting a renewed explosion of interest in the fast-growing country. Direct services to Ho Chi Minh City, link to 15 other destinations and a smart first choice is Hanoi. Only in Asia would a city of seven million rank as a second banana to a bigger rival, as the Vietnamese capital does to its sprawling southern counterpart still routinely referred to as Saigon. Something to mull over as you balance on a small plastic chair at one of the roadside joints at Beer Corner in the Old Quarter, where locals, backpackers and tourists sip on the local draught brew - bia hoi - with a shelf life of only 24 hours.

Most of Hanoi's landmarks are nearby and the Department of Tourism on Hang Dau St offers free walking tours of the historic inner city. A much less scary exercise than it was a few years ago, thanks to the increase in pedestrian zones. Mind you, the dense herds of mopeds that fly past take getting used to, especially when the pavement "runs out".

All walking trips - guided and solo - thread through a labyrinth of small side streets and wind past the 19th century French colonial cathedral of St Joseph, the Temple of Literature founded to honour Confucius in the 11th century and the area's famous antique shops. For a breath of fresher air, head to Hoan Kiem Lake where a photo-op red timber bridge takes you to an islet dominated by a temple dedicated to 14th century general Tran Hung Dao. Another not-to-be-missed pilgrimage spot is the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, where the embalmed

body of the revolutionary who led Vietnam to independence rests in a glass case in the chilly central hall. The jewel of West Lake, a short walk away, is the Tran Quoc Pagoda, one of the oldest in Hanoi.

Your cultural duty done, it's time to get down to what Hanoi does best - food. A market tour is a fun way to dive head first into the local take on one of the world's most famous cuisines. The Hanoi Cooking Centre in Ba Dinh district conducts tours

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in English with chef guides who take you back to base to cook up specialties such as claypot chicken with ginger, garlic and fish sauce. There are also a host of early morning and evening foodie tours available for those who feel a bit iffy about going "freelance" with street food choices.

Pho is the iconic centrepiece of Vietnamese restaurants worldwide. But the rice noodle soup thick with slivers of fresh beef, herbs and bean sprouts is a breakfast dish on its home turf. Nearly every food stall in the Old Quarter serves its own version of the classic but, if you prefer to dine rather than graze on the run, Pho 10 at

10 Ly Quoc Su St is one of the best places to enjoy the dish that conquered the globe.

The big international hotel chains have set up shop in Hanoi en masse. But nostalgia fans opt for the Sofitel Metropole, a colonial bolthole which opened in 1901 and retains its crown as the most prestigious address in town. Like the Oriental in Bangkok, the hotel is divided between the original building of polished wooden floorboards, period furniture and antiques, and a modern wing. The signature restaurant is La Terrasse du Metropole, which takes its cue from historic French bistros with a menu to match. Drop by for a coffee or indulge in traditional Gallic favourites such as entrecote and frites and coq au vin. Head for the roof terrace before or after dinner for its movie-set atmosphere.

Still in the Indochine mood, albeit updated with a twist, is La Verticale. Transplanted Breton chef Didier Corlou has created a not-to-be missed fine dining experience in a 1930s villa which combines French haute cuisine with contemporary Vietnamese in standout dishes such as duck with foie gras and fusion seasoning, shellfish soup with lemongrass and Mekong fruits sorbet. Sunset drinks in the Bamboo Bar should be mandatory.

Corlou also owns Madame Hien, dedicated to his wife's grandmother, where he really indulges his passion for his wife's homeland. The pho here is ambrosial. The Hanoi Opera House, built in 1911, is one of the diminishing number of grand colonial buildings left in Hanoi. In the basement you will find the luxurious Nineteen 11 restaurant where the theme is also the pairing of east and west in signature dishes such as foie gras with mango chutney and

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gluhwein ginger reduction. The Essence Cafe and Restaurant in the Essence Hanoi Hotel is also a dead cert inclusion on any shortlist of the best restaurants in the city.

Another French legacy is a sweet tooth. In the heart of the busy Hoan Kiem district is O'Douceurs Hanoi, which bills itself as specialising in French pastries in the French Quarter. Open all day, it caters to the sugar cravings of locals and tourists with a top array of fruit tarts, breads, macarons and gateaux. Traditional French pastries and croissants share shelf space with deep-fried banh, sweet and savoury doughnuts and spring rolls at Quan Goc Da in Ly Quoc Su St near the cathedral.

Under the come-on line - "Healthy Food for a Healthy Planet" - The Hanoi Social Club is as cool a trendy hangout as you will find at home. The coffee and smoothies are great and so are the Western-style brunch dishes. Full of Hanoi creatives, there are regular musical performances, art exhibitions and craft fairs.

The alleys around Dong Xuan Market are prime territory to enjoy the Vietnamese equivalent of the hot dog - banh mi - a bread-filled roll eaten on the run. Moped drivers just wordlessly hand over the cash at food stalls for a baguette filled with paté, herbs, onion, cucumber and chilli. Another local favourite is ga tan - spatchcocks cooked in Coke cans with seasonal herbs, lotus seeds and dates. The tiny legs poking out of the top of the tin can be a bit off-putting, but the contents are fall-off-the-bone delicious. 🍷



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