

Northern Nostalgia

What birthday gift do you bestow on the man who has everything ... including you? You take him on a surprise trip to somewhere special. I have just whisked mine away for a week to the Vietnamese capital Hanoi, with side trips to Tam Cuc and Halong Bay.

by
Verne Maree

La Metropole – *Formidable!*

Men tend to be a bit silly about cars, and Roy is no exception, so he was chuffed to bits that I had arranged for us to be met at the airport by the Sofitel Metropole's immaculately renovated, chauffeur-driven vintage Citroën stretch limousine.

Any travel guide or a quick flick through the internet will offer hundreds of accommodation options in Hanoi. Undoubtedly the most luxurious and romantic of these is the Metropole: the crème de la crème, the truffle in the omelet, the grande dame of Vietnam hostelrys.

It's somewhat reminiscent of Singapore's Raffles Hotel, but less lofty, more intimate. For a start, it's right on the road, Ngo Quyen Street – La Terrasse, where guests are given a complimentary welcome drink under the stars, is modelled after a pavement café.

French ownership throughout a major revamp in 1992 has ensured that it's kept its original colonial style and an unmistakable Frenchness in the décor, the atmosphere and particularly the food. The management, the finishes and the attention to detail are top-notch. Wherever you look there's a highly competent, smiling, gracious and well-spoken member of staff to help you, the women clad in their elegant traditional dress, the *ao dai*.



Everyone says: "Be sure to get a room in the old (Metropole) wing!", and our atmospheric room there was as beautiful as I'd expected it to be – all dark wood, colonial prints, subtle linen, and shuttered doors and windows. But don't be despondent if you can only get one in the Opera Wing. They are lovely: just as stylish and luxurious, but in a different, more contemporary way. Don't let reports of noisy traffic put



you off, either, because closing the doors and windows completely solves the problem.

On the edge of the French Quarter, the Metropole is a five-minute walk from the southern end of small Hoan Kiem Lake. On the one day we happened (most unusually) to be out at 5.30am, we were amazed by the masses of people taking their morning exercise in the narrow strip of park around the lake: huge groups



doing *taiqi quan*; dozens of badminton players, runners, backward-walkers, stretchers and jumpers.

On another occasion, we came across the most delightful train of five-year-olds out with their pink-clad teachers, the little ones clearly torn between their desire to wave at us as they shouted “Hello!”, “How are you?” and even “What’s your name?”, and no-doubt strict instructions to hold tightly onto one another.

Cyclo Sightseeing

At the northern end of the lake (just ten minutes walk from the hotel), you can branch off into the crowded bustle of the Old Quarter. To really soak up the atmosphere, though, do as we did and take one of the Metropole-approved cyclos from next to the hotel. Once in the Old Quarter, our cyclists stopped unbidden – they probably needed the rest! – at 87 Ma May Street, a beautifully restored tube-house (with narrow street-frontage, but going back in a series of rooms and courtyards for up to 60 metres), now a museum displaying the various trades and crafts practised in the area.

Seemingly restored in vigour, our guides pedalled off to Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum; though they sheepishly admitted once we got there that it was closed on a Friday. We were rather relieved to be spared the sight of the beloved Uncle Ho’s body, which has been embalmed against his express wishes and is on display to the public.

Having continued on to the huge West Lake, the ghastly lunch we ordered at one of the string of restaurants on the water reminded us of the golden rule when travelling: don’t eat at a place where the view is good. Another tip: clarify terms upfront with



your cyclo-cyclist: our two tried their best to demand US\$100 for the three-hour ‘city-tour’, after having agreed to the going rate of US\$2 per hour!

That said, the city centre is so compact that you can do much of your sightseeing on foot from the hotel. The Hanoi Opera House is across the plaza to the rear; walk another block to the History Museum. The better art galleries are central, easy to find, and listed in any good guide. We used the *Rough Guide to Vietnam* and the irreverent *Luxe Guide to Hanoi*.



Getting Around

The traffic in Vietnamese cities is anarchic, to say the least. I was told that Hanoi’s population is 3.5 million; and there are 1.5 million motorbikes, of which an estimated 30 percent have no licence to ride. My response: you mean some of them *do* have licences? Apparently, bike ownership has rocketed in the past seven-to-eight years, since China started making fake Hondas for the Vietnamese and selling them at US\$600 instead of US\$2,000 to US\$3,000.

A variety of day-trips can be arranged through one of the multitude of tour agencies that you’ll see. Through the concierge at the Metropole, we booked a private tour with guide and driver to the ancient Vietnamese capital of Hoa Lu and the valley of Tam Cuc in the province of Ninh Binh, 100km to the south of Hanoi. Our guide, Hang, spoke outstanding colloquial English and was a mine of information; we felt the US\$126 fee was money well spent.



First, we visited two temples built to honour two Ninh Binh kings – a form of ancestor worship, I suppose. But the highlight of the day was being paddled by sampan up the river through the lovely Tam Cuc Valley (see bottom right picture), also known as ‘Halong Bay in the rice-fields’. It’s a two-hour expedition through exquisite scenery and a series of limestone caves made famous in the film *Indochine*. Covered in multi-coloured hooded ponchos, we and a few hundred other sight-seers braved the monsoon rain like so many plastic-coated penguins.

Time to Mange

• The Sofitel Metropole does an outstanding breakfast. It’s going to be tough having to peel my own mangoes again. The buffet even includes a traditional *pho*-stall (pronounced ‘fur’), the classic Vietnamese breakfast of noodle soup with strips of chicken or beef, and fresh green herbs.



• We dined superbly at Le Beaulieu, the Metropole’s fine-dining restaurant. You choose from a fairly small selection of options, but each comes either in ‘traditional’ or ‘innovative’ style. And each course, when it comes, equates to three or four degustation-type dishes: top-notch in every way and a feast for the senses. The Sunday brunch here is a gastronomic institution, too, as is the wicked chocolate buffet (complete with fountain) served in the Met’Pub every afternoon.


• Behind the Metropole, you’ll find a variety of good eateries, including: Au Lac for light bites and cocktails; Club Opera, which we didn’t try but was highly recommended by a fellow-traveller; and the welcoming Press Club café, perfect for breakfast, coffee and cake, light meals, or a US\$7.50 three-course lunch. Best of all, it has free wi-fi.

• Don’t miss Bobby Chin’s, a wildly trendy and outstanding restaurant at the southern end of Hoan Kiem Lake (five-to-ten minutes’ walk from the hotel). The man is a genius with food and a charismatic host.

• For a good meal in the charming courtyard of a typical Old Quarter merchant’s villa (circa 1928), try Green Tangerine at 40 Hang Be Street.

• On the western side of Hoan Kiem Lake, there’s a superb ice-cream shop called Fanny. I had the near-orgasmic ginger ice-cream with chocolate sauce. As the *Luxe Guide* naughtily says, “All ice cream should taste like Fanny’s.”

Getting There:

Tiger Airways has return flights to Hanoi on Thursdays and Sundays; the 4.15pm departure and three-and-a-half-hour flight time means you could easily do a three-night long weekend. To see more of the region, a week is better. See www.tigerairways.com. Remember, though Tiger is a budget airline, you can pay a little more (as we did) and pre-book your seat or upgrade your luggage allowance from 15kg to 20kg. To book the Metropole Hotel, go to www.sofitel.com and click the links to Hanoi hotels. 





Emeraude Waters

Thousands of limestone islands and grottoes rise from the deep, clear waters of Halong Bay. An iconic vision, and the most popular destination in Vietnam, it's one of the natural wonders of the world.

The bay is a three-hour drive from Hanoi, so you can conceivably do it in a day-trip; you'll experience it far better on an overnight cruise, though. And to *really* do it justice, you should do it on the *Emeraude*.

The offices of the *Emeraude* arranged for a private car to pick us up at 8.30am from our Hanoi hotel. It took us across the broad Red River and through its massive rice-field-covered delta; and later, a series of grimy industrial towns that seem hell-bent on levelling the limestone hills for their cement.

We got to the vessel's private quay in Ca Bai – quite separate from the main point where the hundreds of other cruise-vessels, mainly junks, jostle for space – in comfortable time to board, check in and have an icy Tiger draught on the upper deck.

The small cabin had been done out in dark-green wainscoting, bamboo-weave wall-coverings and dark wood, offset by crisp, white bed-linen and brass lamps. The formal restaurant was lovely, too, and wicker furniture, including deck-chairs, on the upper deck evoked images of well-heeled, Pernod-sipping leisure travellers from a bygone era. I would, however, have expected more

stringent maintenance of finishes and furnishings in the public areas, particularly for a five-star outfit.

Three good buffet meals – lunch, dinner and breakfast – are included in the rate; drinks are extra. The barman shook up a mean margarita, not to mention the greeny-blue-hued specialty named after Halong Bay itself.

The afternoon was spent cruising slowly through still waters. Like every other boat, we stopped at Surprise Island, and climbed the steep path to wander through a magnificent limestone cave reminiscent of the Cango Caves in South Africa and those near Nerja, Spain. Next stop was Titov Island, named for the Russian cosmonaut who once visited this steep-sided karst with Ho Chi Minh. A breathtaking climb (in more ways than one)



of about 420 steps takes you to the little pergola at the top, or you can have a dip in the surprisingly cool water off its little beach.

We could also have gone off in kayaks, swum off the boat, had a spa treatment or taken part in an early-evening springroll-folding demonstration. But your time on board is precious, and there's nothing better than relaxing on a deckchair and contemplating the unfolding vista as it silently slips past.

The evening's entertainment could not have been better-chosen. Glass of red in hand, we lounged on the open deck to watch *Indochine*. Night-moored in Halong Bay, the glow of the squid-fishing boats behind the islands casting their surreal shapes into relief, it was like seeing this classic film with its scenes of the Bay, Tam Cuc and Saigon for the first time.

Unusually for us, we were the last to leave the boat. Roy had to be prised off his deckchair, as we were holding up the advance of the small troop of cleaners waiting to prepare the *Emeraude* for the arrival of today's lucky, lucky passengers.

Sailing Halong Bay on the *Emeraude* was a rare privilege, and I don't say this lightly.

First launched in 2002, the *Emeraude* is a replica of a 19th-century paddle-steamer that transported freight along the waterways of French Indochina and offered cruises in Halong Bay. She was one of a fleet of four ships – the others being the *Rubis*, the *Saphir* and the *Perle* – owner-built by three brothers named Roque, who left Bordeaux in 1858 in search of fame and fortune. In 1937, she sank en-route from Hai Phong to Mong Cai, without loss of life. To book a cruise on the *Emeraude*, visit www.emeraude-cruises.com. 