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Hoan Kiem Lake a symbol of Hanoi

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Chairman's message



A warm welcome to all our Hanoi guests.

Please enjoy this summer edition of EHG Post, with ideas of what to see and do around Hanoi, as well as EHG updates.

Clink glasses at The Den Bar, popular with hotel guests and Hanoi locals, particularly for its innovative cocktail menu. Read about the new east wing at our Hoi An property (La Siesta Resort & Spa) where we have designed a terrace of luxury townhouse villas, around a central saltwater pool, in the style of Hoi An old town.

The Hanoi area is regarded as the birthplace of Pho. We look at how the nation's iconic noodle soup was created. Discover how Ly Quoc Su street got its name, why Hoan Kiem Lake is a symbol of Hanoi, stroll along Long Bien Bridge (a photographic dream), or visit Lai Xa village, the birthplace of Vietnamese photography.

Thank you for reading and please enjoy your stay in Hanoi.

ABOUT EHG

Elegance Hospitality is a group of hotels very renowned for our well-equipped facilities and sophisticated service. Founded in the early 2000s, we have developed from our first hotel in Hanoi to the current chain of 6 boutique hotels in Hanoi's Old Quarter and one outstanding resort in Hoi An Town. Our distinctive collection of properties redefines the very concept of boutique and luxury hospitality.

HEAD OFFICE:

Office 703C, Hanoi Towers
Add: 49 Hai Ba Trung Str., Hanoi
Tel: (+84 24) 3862 2222

For media, please contact Ms. Van:

van.dao@elegancehospitalitygroup.com

Hoan Kiem Lake a symbol of Hanoi

Hoan Kiem Lake is a natural freshwater 12-hectare lake. Acting as a rain reservoir and climate control support for the area, it is Hanoi's heart, the center of spiritual and cultural life.

About six centuries ago today's lake was in fact the smaller top half of a much larger body of water. The lower part, called Huu Vong Lake (which no longer exists), was linked to the Red River by a small tributary. The whole lake extended southwards to the area of Lo Duc and Hang Chuoi Streets in Hai Ba Trung District.

Hoan Kiem wasn't its original name either. In centuries past, it had three previous names. The first was Ta Vong, followed by Luc Thuy in honor of its wonderful emerald green-blue color. In the 17th century it was called Thuy Quan Lake as the king at the time used the lake for training his navy. Since the 18th century it has been known as Hoan Kiem Lake, its 4th official name, in honor of a 15th century legend.

King Le Loi (aka Le Thai To) founded the later Le Dynasty, an enlightened golden era in Vietnam's history. Born in 1384, he was a great Vietnamese hero, the perfect embodiment of a just and wise leader. A little like the legend of King Arthur, Le Loi had a magical powerful sword, 'The Will of Heaven' (Thuan Thien), given to him by the Dragon King. It gave him the strength of many men. He used it to defeat the Chinese Ming invaders. Legend says that in 1428 when Le Loi was boating on the lake (Luc Thuy at that time) a golden turtle suddenly surfaced, took the sword from him returning the depths below. Neither the sword nor the turtle were ever found. Le Loi concluded that the Turtle God ie. the golden turtle had come return the sword to the Dragon King who lived in the lake. In recognition, the lake was renamed Hoan Kiem Lake: Lake of the Returned Sword or Sword Lake.

The Turtle God and Dragon King may be fiction, but one auspicious fact is true. Hoan Kiem Lake has been home to a number of rare ancient Yangtze



gigantic softshell giant turtles. The 4th and last one died in January 2016. It was an auspicious moment if one glimpsed Cu Rua (the grandfather turtle) surfacing. This last turtle was one of only four living in the world at the time. Its death was a very sad and poignant moment for Hanoians and Vietnam. It had been much loved by the whole country; it was a famous celebrity and Hanoi's sacred animal – many even believed it to be the incarnation of the mythical Turtle God.

Staying with the turtle theme, in the middle of the lake on a tiny islet is the small Thap Rua (Turtle Tower). This was where another Le Dynasty king, King Le Thanh Tong, used to go fishing. It is believed that in 1886 an unpopular Vietnamese official and

mediator between the Vietnamese and French troops, Nguyen Ngoc Kim, secured permission to build this tower supposedly in memory of King Le Loi. However, he secretly schemed to bury his father's remains on the islet. But, the local people discovered his deception and removed the body.

The three-storied tower's foundations date back to the 19th century, the architecture is a combination of local Vietnamese and French colonial styles. On top of the tower there used to be a 2.85m high mini Statue of Liberty gifted by the French Government to Hanoi in 1887 during the Tonkin Expo. Considered a symbol of colonial government it was removed in August 1945. The tower, however, remains as an important Hanoi symbol of peace, harmony and patriotism.

Dotted around the lake are many important cultural and sacred places. One such monument is Ngoc Son Temple - Temple of the Jade Mountain. Built in 1841 on Jade islet at the north end of the lake, it is linked to the land by the vermilion red wooden arched Huc Bridge (Rising Sun Bridge). The temple is dedicated to a number of Confucian and Taoist scholars as well as General Tran Hung Dao. The General, a great 13th century military leader who defeated Kublai Khan's soldiers, is revered throughout Vietnam. In addition, displayed in a glass case at the temple, is the 3rd of the four giant turtle specimens. Weighing 250kg it died in 1967 despite efforts to save it.

Since October 2016 at weekends roads circling Hoan Kiem Lake are pedestrian only. This is part of the city authority's initiative to promote the importance and value of the area, drawing visitors and local Hanoians to Hanoi's heart to enjoy the environment, entertainment and culture. Just as the turtle represents longevity, endurance and persistence so Hoan Kiem Lake strengthens its immortal and endearing role symbolizing Hanoi's soul and what the city stands for.



The Den Bar

Step into The Den



Lying in wait in the basement of La Siesta Trendy Hotel & Spa on quiet Nguyen Quang Bich Street, is The Den Bar. Down a short flight of steps leads down to the lower ground floor is a secluded chic place to relax over a drink. It is like entering a small private drawing room, a quiet haven. A cool space to chill from the city's summer heat and warm and cozy in the winter when Hanoi temperatures fall.

While The Den Bar is styled to complement the hotel, it also sports its own identity. Part modern speakeasy style, part cigar lounge and part old English man's club, The Den Bar incorporates the best of all personalities creating its own intimate contemporary space. Here, dark hard wood floors meet soft brown leather armchairs, trendy contemporary cocktails accompany classic fine whiskies and retro combines with classic.

The décor is stylish and hip. A color palette of blacks, charcoal greys, chocolate browns, steely blues combined with materials of leather, wood, glass and metal. Layered lighting creates a balanced space while subdued lighting enhances the romantic soothing ambience.

On the menu are wines, mocktails, spirits and malts and non-alcoholic creations of fresh juices. The bar is also the ideal backdrop and setting to enjoy the perfect cocktail.

A cocktail is not simply a drink. It's an art form. Think of the Mixologist, the person who makes the cocktail, as a multi-skilled art technician, performer and director creating artistic and culinary works of art for drinking. Visually artistic, creatively crafted, glasses filled like mini art installations. A cocktail stimulates the senses through colors, flavors and aromas. It's

about the chemistry of drink and skillfully combined ingredients. And let's not forget theatre and performance art. A cocktail tells a story through its name and inspiration behind its creation. The "acrobatics" of making the drink enhances the drama. So, a cocktail is more than a drink. It has its own history, life story and personality.

Theories abound on how the cocktail originated. Although the general view says it was a 19th century American invention from mixing spirits, water, sugar and bitter, some evidence suggests it dates back to 18th century Britain. One point however is indisputable. Since the late 1980s we have seen an incredible revival in the popularity of cocktails, starting in the US and filtering out around world. The industry now is more modern, creative and artistic, inspiring new consumer

trends. And no more so than in Vietnam where the cocktail scene has taken the country by storm.

Seizing on this cocktail craze, the bars of the EHG hotels have creatively crafted a selection of cutting edge menus featuring classic, contemporary and unique recipes. Den Bar staff, trained and inspired by one of the best Vietnamese mixologists in the business, have devised a fascinating selection of signature cocktails and the classics. Sublimely innovative drinks include the Sapa Cocktail, the Rooster and Sign Out. The Sapa Cocktail is a performance art of drink portraying the essence of Sapa's rice terraces complete with dry ice clouds. The Rooster combines iconic ingredients in Vietnamese cuisine such as chili and lemongrass into a spicy refreshing drink. Sign Out has an interesting story behind it which the Den Bar staff will recount, complete with dramatic blue flame effects. The classics also take pride of place with cocktails such as the Classic Martini, Manhattan, Long Island Iced Tea and so on.

Whatever your preference, The Den Bar is the perfect atmospheric setting to enjoy a combination of east and west beverages. Come to one of the bar's cocktail demonstrations, have pre- and after dinner drinks, socialize with friends, chat to the bar staff at the counter or simply end the day with a nightcap. Whatever you are drinking, The Den Bar is a bar for everyone.

THE DEN BAR
(lower ground floor)
La Siesta Trendy Hotel & Spa
12 Nguyen Quang Bich street
Open daily 14:00 to late



Pho glorious Pho (of Hanoi)

Traditionally eaten in the early morning for breakfast, Pho has become an everyday, any time meal and, undeniably, Vietnam's most famous food 'brand ambassador'. Pho's popularity and its esteemed position in society is decades old. Back in the 1930s, Vietnamese novelist and short story writer Thach Lam (1909-1942) paid homage to this dish. He penned the sentiment of Pho being Hanoi's special gift saying that many restaurants served this soup around the country, but Hanoi's version is the best. "Pho is a specialty of Hanoi. You can taste it in other places. But the Pho is better in Hanoi than anywhere else." He commented that Pho is a culture and something he missed greatly when he was out of the city. Sentiments such as these remain true today.

Why is this dish so strongly and famously revered? And what makes Hanoi's Pho particularly good?

As an academic aside, the word 'Pho' actually refers to a type of flat white rice flour noodle rather than the name of the soup. But for simplicity and following the nation's psyche, Pho here refers to Pho noodle soup - of which there are many different variations throughout the country.

Pho is made with either beef or chicken, rice noodles, spices, spring onion and herbs; for vegetarians there

is even Pho chay alternative (vegetarian Pho). Recipes for a perfect clear fragrant broth are often closely guarded family secrets handed down from generation to generation.

Unsurprisingly, given the lack of documentation on the origins of Pho, various theories exist about how this dish arose.

Pho soup first made a recognizable appearance in the early 20th century. Popular in north Vietnam it spread to central and southern regions from the 1950s after the August revolution. Many say Pho originated from the small, poor villages of Van Cu and Dao Cu in Nam Dinh province, south west of Hanoi before the French colonial times. Mr Van, one of the villagers, is said to have gone to Hanoi in 1925 where he opened a Pho stall on Hang Hanh Street (near Hoan Kiem Lake).

Another theory explains Pho was inspired by Chinese and French influences. Rice noodles and spices would have come from China, where a soup similar to Pho already existed. Some people say that in the French colonial era (from the 1880s) the French popularized the cooking of beef (traditionally cows were used more for agricultural farm work). The appeal of eating beef widened amongst the Vietnamese population, especially the middle class, while

poorer citizens creatively used the discarded bones and meat parts to make a delicious soup. Meanwhile, others point out a similarity in pronunciation. 'Pho' could be an adaption of the French word 'feu' meaning fire. And, although a different type of dish, one theory says Pho is a modification of the French beef stew pot-au-feu introduced into Vietnam by the French.

A common sight in late 19th century Hanoi would have been mobile Pho vendors carrying their culinary delights around the city, stopping on street corners to sell their delicious soup from dawn until dusk. Then, around 1910 fixed Pho stalls appeared. It is believed the first were the state-owned Cat Tuong stall on Cau Go Street, a Chinese owned establishment at the Hoan Kiem Lake tram stop and Truong Ca stall in Hang Bac Street. By 1918 a few more had opened up before Mr Van from Nam Dinh arrived in 1925.

Originally, there was only one type of Pho soup which was made from well-done beef. Then in 1939, following a government crackdown on slaughtering cows and preventing the sale of beef on Mondays and Fridays, people switched to making chicken Pho soup as beef supplies dwindled.

Nowadays variety abounds. One only has to look at any Pho shop menu to enjoy the long list of beef Pho options

including well done meat (chin), rare (tai), flank steak (nam), fatty brisket (gau), beef meatballs (bo vien) and so on. Equally popular is chicken Pho but the variety is less while the dish is more modest, lighter and quicker to prepare than its beef counterpart.

Pho dishes (let's refer here to the beef variety) also have regional variations. Pho in Hanoi and north Vietnam ('Pho Bac') is a simpler soup, using fewer ingredients and cuts of meat than in the south. The white pho noodles also differ between the two regions. Hanoi Pho broth is purer, sprinkled with chopped green onions and basil, supplemented by fresh red chili, chili sauce, chili and garlic in vinegar and lime on the side. Southern style Pho ('Pho Nam') requires more ingredients. The broth is sweeter and thicker while southerners also include raw beansprouts, mint, hoisin sauce and lime on the side.

No doubt everyone has a favorite Pho dish, from their favorite pho stall. But rightly or wrongly, the true Pho connoisseurs would say Pho Bac (northern Pho) is the true Pho.

Pho noodle soup is now one of Vietnam's most iconic dishes. It is the star of a decades old love affair which started in the north, blossomed in Hanoi, and remains forever strong.

Famous Streets who was Ly Quoc Su?



Hanoi has around 1,200 streets named after famous people, celebrities, Vietnamese historical events, landmarks and so on. One such street, near Hoan Kiem Lake, is Ly Quoc Su Street linking Hang Bong and Nha Tho Streets. Ly Quoc Su was an 11th century mandarin and Buddhist monk from the Ly Dynasty. He was also a master bronze caster, travelling far and wide collecting bronze for casting. He was very revered, reputed to be wise, big and powerful. In images he was often depicted leaning on a heavy iron stick wearing a small conical hat and carrying a sedge bag.

He was born Nguyen Chi Thanh in 1066 in Nam Dinh province. However, he was well known as Nguyen Minh Khong, his Buddhist name. He also went by the name Khong Lo, while Ly Quoc Su is the name of honor bestowed on him by one of the Ly kings.

At 11 years old Nguyen Minh Khong prepared to enter the Buddhist monkhood. His Zen teacher, an esteemed monk and excellent healer, predicted his star pupil would be called upon to make a miraculous cure in the future. In 1138 Nguyen Minh Khong was summoned to restore the health of King Ly Than Tong who appeared to be suffering from a mysteriously incurable disease – an affliction which made him believe he was a tiger. It was said he had to be restrained in a cage, he was

violent and would only eat raw meat. Such a delusional belief was not uncommon at the time but previous doctors had failed to find a remedy.

Nguyen Minh Khong placed 100 needles in boiling oil which he stuck in the King and washed him with the oil. Immediately the King recovered. Nguyen Minh Khong was rewarded many times over. The King gave him the highest ranking title of Ly Quoc Su (meaning National Advisor of the Kingdom – of the Ly Dynasty) and gifted him a 12-storied residence next to Bao Thien Pagoda (no longer exists) in what was then Tien Thi village, near Hoan Kiem Lake. Nguyen Minh Khong, or let's refer to him now as Ly Quoc Su, lived in this residence teaching medicine and curing illness as well as instructing local artisans in the art of bronze casting. Incidentally, it is said that after curing the King, Ly Quoc Su was also offered the keys from different royal storage rooms. He was allowed to choose anything he wanted, including gold from the royal store. However, he refused, asking only for "a bag of bronze to cast a bell, to educate the people, save the good and eliminate the bad". He selected black copper and cast the "Four Treasures of Buddhism". These are a 60m high statue, the 9-storied Bao Thien Tower, an incense burner and a giant bronze bell. When the bell was struck it signified peace in the country.

Ly Quoc Su died 1141 in Nam Dinh. Afterwards the then king, King Ly Anh Tong, the 6th emperor of the Ly Dynasty and son of Ly Than Tong, erected a temple in Ly Quoc Su's honor on the site of his Hanoi residence. This is Ly Quoc Su Pagoda/Chua Ly Trieu Quoc Su. Located at number 50 Ly Quoc Su Street, at nearly 1,000 years old it is one of Hanoi's oldest places of worship. Originally designed to be temple, it is now a pagoda (dedicated to Buddha) but still honors Ly Quoc Su. The complex houses his statue and the left hand altar is dedicated to him. The pagoda also includes many Buddha statues, a precious 19th century bell of Tu Chung and a stone stele dating from 1855.

On the opposite side of the road at number 25 Ly Quoc Su Street is Phu Ung Temple built during the Tran Dynasty. It is dedicated to General Tran Hung Dao (the 13th century military general) and Pham Ngu Lao who defended Vietnam against three Mongolian invasions.

At the end of Ly Quoc Su Street (as the road morphs into Nha Chung Street at the T-Junction with Nha Tho street) is St Joseph's Cathedral. The French demolished the spectacular Bao Thien Pagoda (which dated from

1057) and in its place constructed this neo-Gothic Catholic cathedral which opened in December 1886.

The street also has a link with 2nd Ly Dynasty. There was once a female poet called Ho Xuan Huong. It is believed she owned a small tea stall on the street where men of letters socialized. On the topic of food and drink, Ly Quoc Su Street is a delight for culinary lovers with a great variety of food stalls. The T-Junction is a great place to enjoy iced lemon tea. Perch on low stalls, watch the world go by around the Cathedral courtyard, while munching on sunflower seeds. Those with a sweet tooth can take their pick from small stores selling fruit jams and fruit segments. Close to a big Banyan tree is a food stall selling Banh Goi which are crescent shaped fried pastries as well as sticky rice ones filled with pork, mushroom, onions and spices. Meanwhile, for a great bowl of Pho beef noodle soup head in the direction of Hang Bong Street to Pho 10 Ly Quoc Su with its distinctive orange exterior, always packed with customers.

Ly Quoc Su Street has witnessed many centuries of change but it still remains one of Hanoi's most eclectic, bustling and colorful areas.



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Powerful Hoi An architecture and luxurious interiors

The majestic, enchanting and superior color yellow is one of the most uplifting colors of the spectrum. Visitors to Hoi An won't be surprised to learn that a nickname given to the town is 'Yellow City' of Vietnam. And according to local Hoi An resident and French photographer Réhahn, Hoi An is always wrapped in sunshine.

Hoi An, translated as "peaceful meeting place" is an exceptionally well preserved community. Its ancient houses, tight yellow ochre terraces bathed in light, moss covered walls, sloping roofs, verandas, balconies and wooden balustrades speak of an impressive historical and cultural legacy.

This former wealthy trading port, dating from the 15th to 19th centuries and honored in 1999 as a UNESCO World Heritage site, is home to nearly 1,000 ancient buildings and a charming architectural glory.

Being at a cultural crossroads linking Cham, Japanese, Chinese, Indian and French influences, Hoi An embodies an

exclusively unique architectural style where East meets West. A style not really seen elsewhere in Vietnam.

La Siesta Resort & Spa embodies a powerful reflection of Hoi An's unique blend of influences, style and colors. The new east wing can be imagined as an extension and combination of the ancient town's architectural splendor and prosperous past.

Eight majestic sunshine-yellow townhouse villas, grouped into tight terraces, are bathed in light from early morning to dusk - a wash which strengthens the depth of the yellow-hued walls. First floor suites with front porches and backs opening onto gardens hint at the homes of former merchants and officers in colonial times which had front decks and inner living spaces leading to back yards.

Let your eye wander upwards to the rows of wooden balconies, passageways connected by arches and traditional Hoi An-style narrow wooden doorways - a reflection of the town's colonnaded

houses with dark wooden balustrades and verandas.

The east wing façade is symmetrically bewitching in style, just as its ancient town counterpart. Quintessential deep pitched roofs with yin yang red-brown tiles epitomize the Chinese influence. Corridors, terraces and verandas give shade from the sun and create a cooling airflow effect, just as the 1920s-40s French architecture was adapted to Hoi An weather's and environment. An imposing east wing style at home with harmony and nature, cool in the summer and cozy in the cooler months.

Just as the old town has a powerfully unique style reflecting east and west cultures, so La Siesta Resort & Spa combines Hoi An architecture with luxurious and appealing beautiful interiors. Cool rooms versus the brightness and heat of the outside. A palette of whites, pale biscuit colors contrast with dark browns, dusty grey blues and sage greens to create a timeless calming environment and a

touch of class. Highly polished dark wooden floors add depth. Vintage geometric patterned floor and wall tiles, adopting the interior color palette blend perfectly in style. Light streams through the windows framed by taupe colored soft drapes. High quality period-style furniture creates a combined neo-classical and French colonial interior design concept. Styles that, maybe, hint at Sheraton and Hepplewhite furniture contrast with Asian elements. High quality soft white linens, upmarket amenities and high end accessories add luxurious touches.

What is strikingly evident in the design is the exacting precision of every element. Each has its place. There is no clutter or over indulgence. The effect created is simple, minimal and very sophisticated. As the saying goes, 'less is more'.

The east wing is a balance of Hoi An's glorious architectural heritage and stately interior comfort affording everyone a touch of luxury.



A picture is worth a thousand words

A small understated village 15km west of central Hanoi is the recognized birthplace of photography in Vietnam, plus the residence of many talented photographers, academics and scholars. Welcome to Lai Xa village.

Influential and prestigious former inhabitants have included Prof. Dr. Nguyen Van Huyen (1908-1975) an historian, ethnologist, cultural researcher and the former Minister of Education for 30 years (1945-1975); Vu Dinh Hong, Ho Chi Minh's photographer during 1960-69; Nguyen Quang Quyen former President of the Ho Chi Minh University of Medicine and Nguyen Quang Thai, a popular mathematician.

The village already has a wonderful 4-storied museum, the Nguyen Van Huyen museum, dedicated to the aforementioned Education Minister, which documents his life and society at the time. And the community was keen to put its photographic fame on today's modern map. The seed of an idea planted in 2015 has now come to fruition. On 15 May 2017 the village opened a new museum. The Lai Xa Photography museum is the brainchild of leading village figures such as Prof. Nguyen Van Huy (Director of Nguyen

Van Huyen Museum and Founding Director of Vietnam Museum of Ethnology) and the Lai Xa Photography Club. The villagers dug deep into their pockets to fund the construction themselves while museum designers employed modern technologies in the installation of exhibits as well as seeking advice from local and international experts.

In 2008 Lai Xa was recognized as Vietnam's only village dedicated to the photography trade; even today up to 80% of villagers are professional or amateur photographers. Over the years numerous Lai Xa photography artists have established businesses around the world including Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, China and many European countries. If a photography studio incorporates the words 'Ky' or 'Lai' in its business name, then it's likely to be associated with Lai Xa village and named in honor of the founding father.

Photography flourished here in the first half the 20th century thanks to one man, Nguyen Dinh Khanh, commonly known as Khanh Ky. Born into a poor farming family in 1874, he trained as a photographer and inspired generations of others. His influence remains

strong today. It was he who, in essence, made the village a 'photography village'. Khanh Ky is one of four historically important photographers in Vietnam. The other three being Vo An Ninh, Dinh Dang Dinh and Dang Huy Tru (who originally introduced photography into Vietnam).

Khanh Ky fostered a strong photographic spirit in society and within the country. He is worshipped as the father of photography in Vietnam, turning the trade into an art form.

One of his many claims to fame is that he taught photography to President Ho Chi Minh.

His parents died when he was very young. In his teenage years he did an apprenticeship at a photography shop in Hanoi. He clearly possessed natural instinct, quickly mastering the art. When he was 18 years he opened the Khanh Ky photo lab on Hang Da Street, Hanoi in 1892. This was only the second studio at the time to be established by a Vietnamese. Soon up to 200 more photo studios opened throughout Vietnam employing more than 2,000 photographers. 35 labs were Hanoi based, 35 more in Saigon and the remainder dotted throughout

other provinces and towns including Hai Phong and Nam Dinh.

Khanh Ky died in Paris on 31 May 1946. Each year Lai Xa village commemorates the anniversary of his death and he is honored in the new museum.

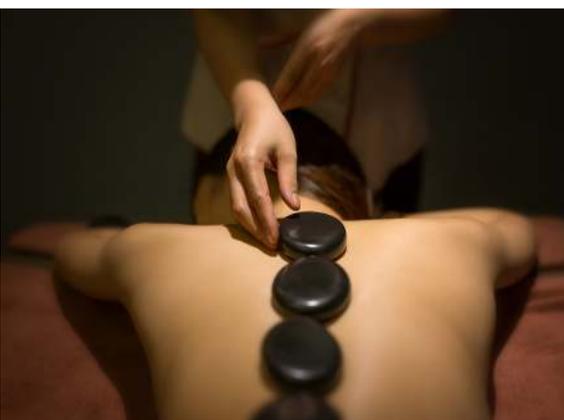
Up to 150 photos, 25 panels/graphics and 15 glass cases containing 150 objects are displayed at Lai Xa photography two-storied museum. The exhibits, occupying 300sqm of space, illustrate stories of the photography trade, culture and society and document how Khanh Ky, his peers, followers and successors turned this once agricultural village into a prominent photographic center.

During its conception, the museum authorities appealed to people to contribute items relating to photography and the village craft for inclusion in the museum's collection. Many current and former villagers donated equipment, cameras, photos and stories.

The museum features different spaces such as a replica of an old photo studio and demonstration of old studio lighting techniques, photos showing the very first photographers of the village as well as portrait photography, photos of popular artists, an exhibit dedicated to the originators of photography, displays of tools of the trade such as pen brushes, metallic papers, photo boxes and different types of cameras and so on. The Khanh Ky Photography Club, named after its founding father, and many of the village's photo studios have all played their part and made contributions.

The creation of the photography museum has been an inspiring neighborhood initiative. This museum, together with the Nguyen Van Huyen Museum, is an inspiring way for the village to showcase its creative and academic expertise. The villagers are proud to promote their community both as a tourist destination and to demonstrate the village's important role in history.

Lai Xa Photography Museum
open at weekends 09:00-16:30
(Saturday/ Sunday)
Lai Xa village, Kim Chung
commune, Hoai Duc district,
15km west of central Hanoi



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Iconic Structures: Long Bien Bridge

A bridge between the past, present and future

Dr Vu Manh Ha, Deputy Director of the National Museum of Vietnamese History once described Long Bien Bridge as “a work of art in the shape of a dragon undulating across the [Red] Hong River...”

The dragon, one of the four sacred animals in Vietnamese heritage, symbolizes national power and prosperity. Long Bien Bridge (‘long’ means dragon, ‘bien’ means edge) lives up to its namesake. Stretching 2,290m majestically across the mighty Red River, Long Bien Bridge, with 19 steel beams on 20 supporting columns, links the two districts of Hoan Kiem and Gia Lam. At the time, it was the first steel structure to span this river and once the largest bridge in French Indochina.

Originally called Paul Doumer Bridge, after the Governor-General of French Indochina (1897-1902), the bridge was a structural masterpiece, the epitome of Doumer’s great ambitions. A traffic management master plan - a system of roads, railways and seaports - was envisaged in order to strengthen French control of the region, demonstrating France was ‘here to stay’. Despite some opposition, construction of this historic cantilever structure was approved. At the time it was one of the four greatest bridges in the world and one of the greatest engineering accomplishments of the French colonial government.

Following a tender process, the contract was awarded to French architects Daydé & Pillé of Paris, experts in bridge construction. Work took around three years from 1899 to 1902 (less than the estimated five years) with an initial budget of 5,390,794 French Francs rising to 6,200,000 by completion.

40 French supervisors and engineers oversaw the construction, employing more than 3,000 Vietnamese labor. Much of the materials used in the construction were locally sourced including wood from Phu Tho, cement from Hai Phong and lime from Hue, although the steel beams came from France. This feat of engineering used 30,000 cubic meters of stone, 5,600 tonnes of rolled steel, 137 tonnes of cast iron, 165 tonnes of iron and 7 tons of lead. Contrary to general assumptions, Gustav Eiffel (of Eiffel Tower fame) did not appear to be involved at any stage in the design and construction. Still evident today the bridge retains the metal plate engraved with the text ‘1899-1902 - Daydé & Pillé, Paris’.

The bridge was inaugurated on 2 February 1902. The first train crossed on 28 February that year and traffic was accepted in 1903. In those days it was the only bridge connecting Hanoi with the major port of Hai Phong. While it was strategically important in securing

French control of north Vietnam, the bridge also played a crucial role in Vietnam’s fight for independence. Many Vietnamese from the countryside traversed the bridge en route to Ba Dinh Square to hear President Ho Chi Minh deliver the Declaration of Independence in September 1945. Long Bien Bridge played a vital role in ending the first Indochina war (1946-54). During the battle of Dien Bien Phu, it was the main transport and supply route from the north to the battle site near the Laos border. Hence, its valuable contribution to the Viet Minh victory over the French which ended the 8-year old war in March 1954. After this defeat, France pulled out of Indochina. Civilians and French troops left Hanoi crossing the bridge on foot and by train. When the final contingent of French soldiers departed on 9 October 1954 the name Paul Doumer left with them. After 1954 the Vietnamese authorities renamed the bridge Long Bien Bridge.

The bridge faced war time again during the Vietnam War. Given its strategic importance, it was bombed 14 times in 1967 and 1972. But this resilient structure always bounced back to life.

Its formidable and imposing iron frame has long been the subject of patriotic songs, poems, literature and an eternal

subject for painters and photographers. The bridge has a daily life of its own both above and below. Although in 1924 cars were allowed to drive across, it has long been closed to motor vehicles (which now use the five other bridges spanning the river - Thang Long, Nhat Tan, Chuong Duong, Vinh Tuy and Thanh Tri). The central section of Long Bien Bridge carries a single train track servicing the Hanoi-Lang Son rail line. The inner borders are for motorbikes and cycles while the outer edges of concrete slabs resting on steel frames form the pedestrian walkways. Informal commerce takes place at various points along the bridge with vendors selling fruit, vegetables and snacks. The bridge continues to take pride of place in countless wedding photos and remains a dramatic backdrop for daily exercise. Stretching below Long Bien Bridge are market gardens, farm land, communities of floating houseboats and passing river traffic.

In 2014 Long Bien Bridge was recognized as a national historical site. The bridge has a unique history. It has contributed to war efforts and economic and industrial advancement. It is a work of art in its own right. It is a source of pride for the Hanoi people and a symbol of enduring strength of the Vietnamese nation.

