

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## SAMUI IN BLOOM

**MONGOLIA**  
ON THE  
HORIZON

**THE SWEET**  
SIDE OF  
**PARIS**

**TAKE**  
**PHOTOS**  
LIKE A PRO

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# Saving Face

Taking photos of people you meet while traveling can be a great cultural exchange. **Jeninne Lee-St. John** heads out of Hoi An with a pro and learns how to turn on the charm.



FROM TOP: The author laughed with a girl in Thanh Ha, near Hoi An; photographer, Etienne Bossot.

**ETIENNE BOSSOT GOT** a job in Hoi An selling wine (“like all other young French guys,” he says), bought a camera with his first paycheck, and began spending time roaming the countryside, meeting locals. “I’d get lost in a village close to dusk,” he says, “and they’d invite me to dinner, so I’d stay, learn more Vietnamese, learn about the culture.” Eventually, he invested all his savings into founding Hoi An Photo Tours & Workshop, keeping just US\$80 that he hoped to stretch for three months sleeping on friends’ couches. But the business took off swiftly as visitors realized that, first, as naturally photogenic as the 500-year-old former trading port is, it can still be revelatory to have someone help you capture the Crayola-box lantern-lit lanes in fresh ways. Second, and the reason I was here: outside the tourist

town, there’s an entire world of fishing and farming communities to meet, and Etienne has access.

Tourism portraiture rightly makes many feel uncomfortable. We know intuitively that we shouldn’t be sticking lenses into people’s faces to emphasize how different their lives are from ours just for social media likes. Rural villages aren’t zoos. But, portraits are also incredibly powerful—the shy smile of a novice monk, the inquisitive eyes of an infant, the deep wrinkles on an old woman tell a story more profoundly than any caption. Besides a personal tale, they demonstrate an intimacy with the photographer. I wanted to learn how to get that chemistry.

Which is why the first thing out of Etienne’s mouth when we reached the village in Thanh Ha, a 20-minute long-tail putter west of Hoi An,

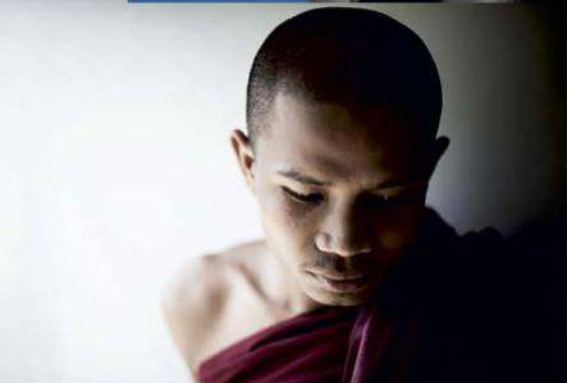
surprised me. “Your subject is unimportant,” he said. “Pick the person you want to photograph, then immediately forget about them. Ask yourself, where is the light coming from? Is the background interesting? How can you frame the field to take most advantage of these elements? Only then can you look back at your subject, get into position, and take the photo.” At one point he paused in front of a long, faded turquoise wall warmed by the sun. “I might just wait here for someone to cycle by,” he said.

Obviously, once a beginner sorts out all these compositional elements in her head, and fiddles with her settings, she’s already missed the shot. But that’s why the entire adventure should be deliberate. Your first instinct—to point, click and scuttle off as quickly as possible so as not to intrude too much—is actually more intrusive, awkward. Take a minute, relax, smile. Even if you don’t speak the language, smiling goes a long way. (But better if you do speak even a few words.)

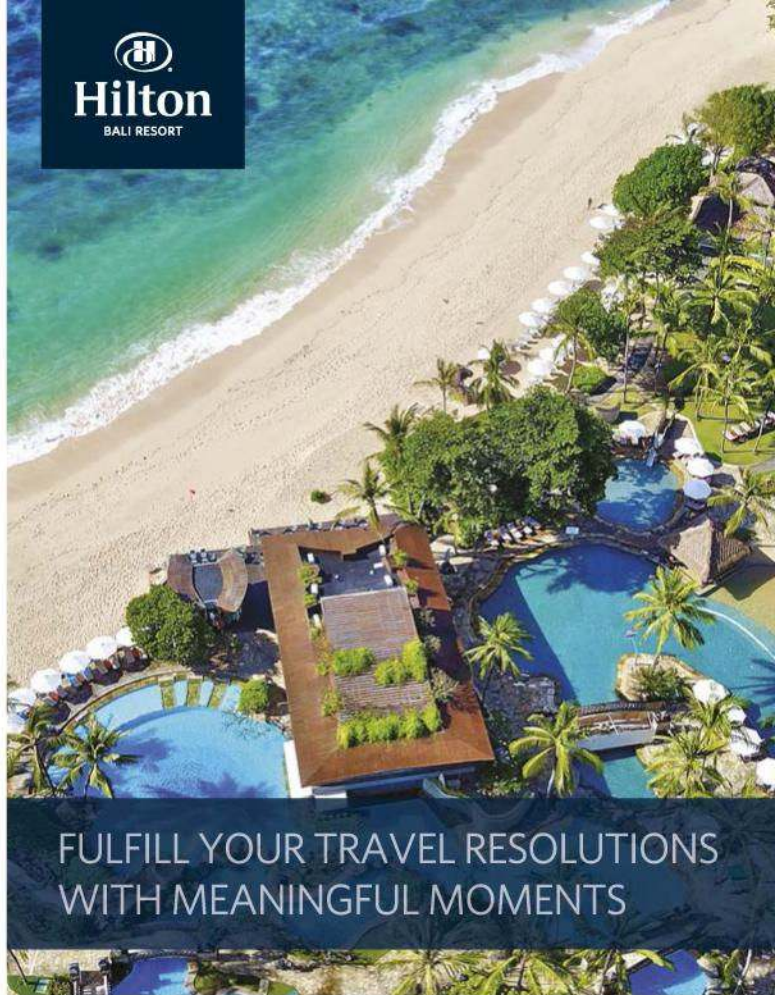
Two women in conical hats were fanning out greenery on pavement to dry, the leaves providing interesting texture, the hats offering a cultural touchstone. “This could be a good picture. But how do you approach it? Ask dumb questions. I say, ‘Oh, what are you doing? Can you eat that? Can I taste?’ Inevitably they laugh at me and that breaks the ice,” he said. “If you want to catch a natural gaze, ask about a physical place, or point at your friend. Your subject will look.” >>

ETIENNE BOSSOT (2)

FROM TOP: A young Hmong girl in Mu Cang Chai, Vietnam; a Burmese monk.



  
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Traipsing through the village like a Pied Piper, four of us photo tourists trailing behind, he stopped often to chat with kids playing soccer or old folks on a porch, to admire shadows, to remind us how lucky we were that it was Vietnamese National Day because not only were there lots of people hanging out but also every house was flying the country's crimson flag—a nice pop of color and flutter. “What do you do with the pictures?” the guys in the villages always want to know,” he said. “I tell them, people just like to have them, it helps remember the visit. This is so funny to them.”

In a field we met two old men minding a couple of water buffalo. One of them had wrinkles etched in his caramel skin and disarmingly kind eyes. He was also positioned prime in the fading sun. I asked him how old he was, why he was sitting out in this field, if I could take a photo. I was determined to get the perfect shot of him. Of the best image I captured, Etienne said, “Yes. But... see that buffalo coming out of his head?” Damn.

In front of one house was a huge pile of corn the orange of basketballs.



Catching a candid moment during one of Bossot's sunset tours.

A baby sat playing with a cob, then, perhaps when he realized we had the same level of Vietnamese language skills, toddled over to me flashing his giant brown eyes. The focus in the shot wound up somewhere on the corn pile. “Kids are great. But kids move,” Etienne shrugged. “Next time, up your shutter speed.”

The last house on my way out of town was bright cerulean, there was a green yard and a pretty iron gate. I started to take photos of a foursome standing at a distance in front of the porch, but a woman in a plaid shirt buttoned up to her neck popped up, waved and came running. “*Chao chi*,” I said. Hello, older sister. “*Co*,” she laughed, correcting me. Aunt.

Then she made a funny face—maybe imitating what I looked like holding up the camera—and danced around. She gave me a bear hug. For some reason, I offered her my sunglasses, and when she put them on she went from goofball to gangsta.

“Wow,” Etienne said looking at the series over a beer later. “I’ve tried to talk to her and she never leaves the porch.” I may have taken eight passable photos out of 295 but this dumb tourist was feeling pretty smart—if only for a flicker. [hoianphototour.com](http://hoianphototour.com); *tours from US\$45*; Etienne is based in Hoi An but also leads photo tours in other countries in the region through [picsofasia.com](http://picsofasia.com). 📍



## STAY

Though tourism in Hoi An has skyrocketed, there remain a few refuges in the city limits, and **La Siesta Resort and Spa** is one. Overlooking rice paddies, it is hidden behind a small, subtle, vine-covered façade that belies the large, graceful space inside. You head through the lobby to a pool deck, turn the corner into a lush garden that hosts tranquil private barbecues (the signature triangular prawn-and-pork spring rolls are a must) and emerge into an entirely new section of Eden. La Siesta, part of a family-owned group of boutique hotels based in Hanoi, has recently expanded beyond their original building

to include a handsome wing where the rooms feel more like villas and the photogenic saltwater pool transports you to Bali (monumental fountains; cabana swings).

This block of luxury suites is all colonial-style floor tiles and claw-foot tubs (though the Veranda Suite Pool View bathroom boasts a stunning chestnut- and beaver-brown polished wooden tub that, with the private sauna next to it, looks like it should be in a ski chalet), and meditative balconies, porches or even backyards. It's a study in gentility matched by the demeanor of the staff, whose mastery of English chat is as impressive as their assiduity.

Take a cooking class on the portico and sweet chef Ty will drop knowledge most never bother to explain to foreigners (example: Hoi An's famed noodle and beef soup *bun bo* differs from its northern cousin *bun bo Hue* in that the latter uses shrimp paste). Hop the hotel's shuttle to the shore at An Bang and you have access to a beach club they've partnered with. Retire to the spa, a showpiece at the center of the property, where the pan-Asian treatments contain the best techniques of the region. There's a beautiful town out there beyond these walls, but you'll be thankful for the oasis. [lasiestaresorts.com](http://lasiestaresorts.com); *doubles from US\$85*.

FROM TOP: ETIENNE BOSSOT; COURTESY OF LA SIESTA HOI AN RESORT & SPA (2)