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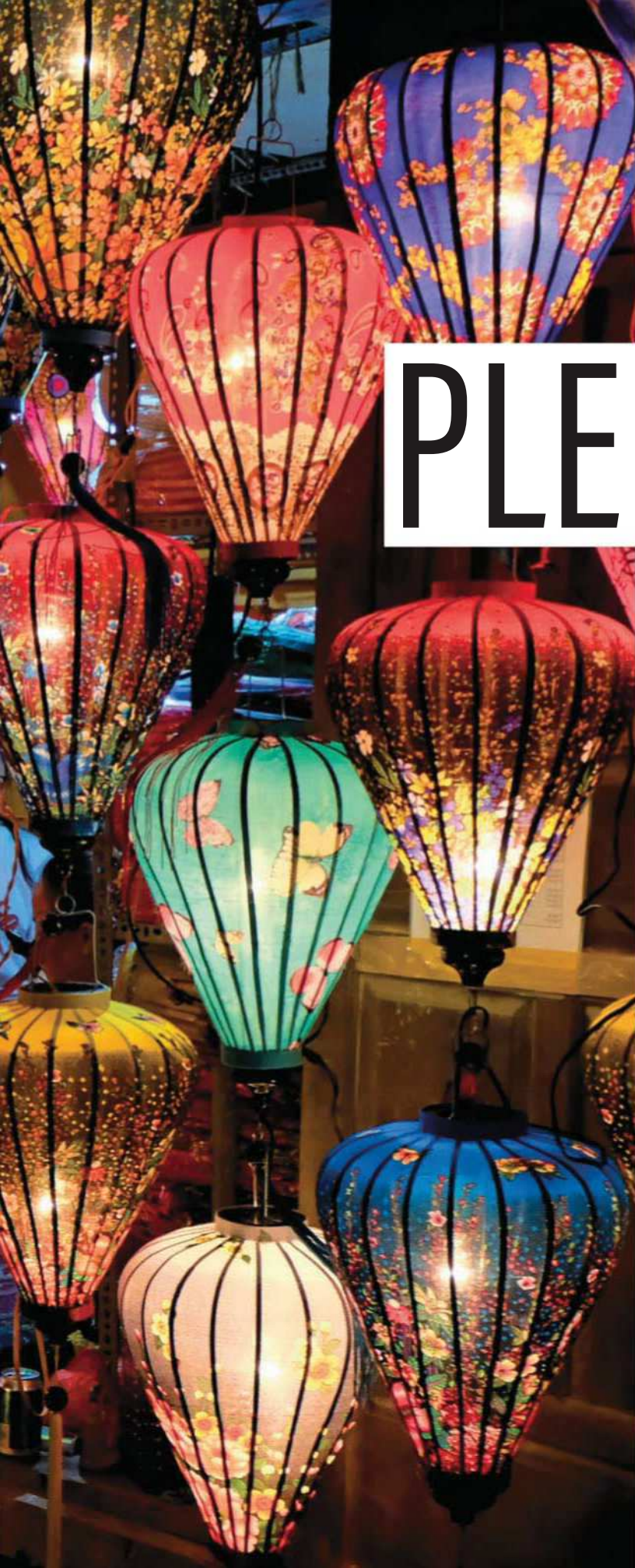


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Exploring Hoi An on two wheels is the best way
to appreciate the charming "City of Lanterns"

WORDS TAMSIN COCKS



SIMPLE PLEASURES

The view from my balcony in the new East Wing at La Siesta Hoi An Resort & Spa is enticing: a saltwater lagoon pool dotted with palm trees, surrounded by a courtyard of ochre European-style villas. The view inside my spacious, colonial-style Junior Suite is pretty decent too: gorgeous handcrafted teak furniture, polished wooden floors and a blend of modern Asian décor.

But what's grabbed my attention is a striking black-and-white photograph on the wall; the portrait captures a wizened old Vietnamese couple sharing an intimate joke. Her unforgettable toothless grin beams from ear to ear as her mischievous husband, with an equally iconic tuft of white beard, tenderly tousles her hair. The absolute joy and mutual affection radiating from the seemingly poor elderly couple is powerful and utterly captivating.

Other art pieces are dotted throughout the room showing moments from Vietnam's past – much of it serene scenes of local life. There are conical hat-wearing farmers watering their crops, children playing by lily ponds and fishermen steering traditional boats through waterways. It's the perfect foreshadowing for the next few days of relaxing and soaking up the charming appeal of Vietnam's slow-paced rural life.

Hoi An, in Quang Nam province, is worlds away from the frantic moped-swarmed cities of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh, or glitzy resort-filled neighbour Danang, just 40 minutes up the coast and the entry point for most Hoi An-bound visitors via Danang International Airport.

In the centre is the well-preserved ancient town, a major 16th-century trading point in Southeast Asia that was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1999. The town's legacy as a cultural melting pot is strongly reflected in the unique architecture, comprising an eclectic mix of traditional Vietnamese, Chinese, French, Portuguese and Japanese architecture. The picturesque maze of alleys is now home to boutique art galleries, shops and traditional tailors that are well worth a visit, but simply exploring and soaking up the atmosphere is rewarding in itself. Unlike many other Vietnamese destinations, where extreme



driving courses are recommended for foreigners hiring any form of road vehicle, the quiet, leafy boulevards around Hoi An can easily and safely be navigated by bicycle – it's an idyllic form of transport, and since cars and motorbikes are banned from the town centre it's more convenient, too.

Further along the river, the town gives way to more local food markets and it's here that you'll find some of Vietnam's best restaurants. According to celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, the *banh mi* (Vietnamese baguette sandwich) from Banh Mi Phuong restaurant (2B Phan Chau Trinh, Hoi An) are the best in the country. You must also try Hoi An's signature dish, *cao lau* – rice noodles in a fragrant broth with slices of pork, crunchy fresh vegetables, bean sprouts and herbs. The town is also credited with the creation of *mi quang* (flat rice noodles with shrimp, pork and grilled rice crackers) and *banh vac* (shrimp dumplings), plus a few other local favourites. Suffice to say – your taste buds are in for a treat.

Another adornment that makes this beautiful heritage town even more enchanting is the constant presence of lanterns – a tradition reportedly started by Chinese immigrants in the 16th century that has taken on a life of its own and given Hoi An the moniker



Hoi An can easily and safely be navigated by bicycle – it's an idyllic form of transport

“City of Lanterns”. When evening arrives, the lantern shops draw us like moths to a flame as we become mesmerised by the wall of bright, warm colours, differing shapes and intricate patterns – an ideal tourist souvenir. The night markets are also filled with a mixture of lovely keepsakes and unusual items ranging from clothes and shoes to beautiful lacquerware ornaments, silks and cushion covers.

For those looking for evening entertainment, a few typical backpacker-style bars are mixed in amongst a selection of local and high-end restaurants and dessert-style eateries. However, I head back to dine at La Siesta Resort & Spa as they are hosting their Weekly Royal Dinner – an authentic Vietnamese barbecue held on the lawn of Red Bean restaurant every Saturday (seating is limited, so hotel guests need to reserve in advance).

To mark the occasion, guests are encouraged to select a traditional *ao dai* (colourful silk tunic) from a rack in the lobby – with accompanying hat. Never one to shy away

Come evening, the lantern shops draw us like moths to a flame, mesmerised by the bright, warm colours

from a costume, I gleefully select a striking red number, though within minutes Vietnam’s stifling heat has convinced me of my folly and I change back into normal attire after a quick photo. The buffet is a glorious seafood feast, with baked fish, fresh mussels, giant prawns, juicy scallops and lobster bisque, complete with a tableside prawn-shelling service and accompanied with fresh salad, rice paper rolls and a delicious, chilled sauvignon blanc. While this is a particular treat, the normal service at Red Bean and the breakfast buffet is equally delicious (particularly the rich Vietnamese coffees waiting in the fridges), while the modern European fine dining at The Temple Restaurant & Lounge is exceptional: on another evening, I sampled artfully presented salmon with tagliatelle and roasted vegetables followed by a beautiful passionfruit cheesecake.

The next morning we’re up early to embark on a day of cultural sightseeing to experience the “real” Vietnam, guided by genial hotel manager Bentony Vu. We each take one of the hotel’s quaint, basket-fronted bicycles, don our conical hats (remarkably adept at protecting

CLOCKWISE
FROM OPPOSITE
TOP LEFT:
Iconic
Japanese
bridge in Hoi
An’s old town;
cycling the
countryside;
and an old
Vietnamese
couple




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Our cycling route takes us past village temples, through rice fields and skirting lotus ponds and lakes

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Lotus ponds dot the Hoi An landscape; Junior Suite Balcony room in La Siesta Hoi An Resort; and a *thung chai* basket boat

from the sun while allowing a slight breeze to cool the head, thus avoiding the dreaded “hat hair”) and set off in single file along the roads – countering the odd wobble as our childhood muscle memory kicks in. Within minutes, we’ve left any semblance of the town and find ourselves surrounded by beautiful countryside. Our route takes us ambling past village temples, through rice fields, and skirting lotus ponds and lakes. At one point we come across a local farmer slowly riding his water buffalo to the next field – he laughingly asks if we’d like to clamber aboard, though the smell emitting from the buffalo is a little too authentic for my tastes.

Eventually we roll to a stop in Tra Que village, a vegetable farming village that has evolved into an ecotourism hotspot for visitors who are keen to understand and get involved in authentic local experiences. We park our bikes in the courtyard of a modest one-storey abode and wait for our hosts. When they emerge, my jaw drops: out shuffles the tiny old lady from the photograph in my hotel room, her beatific, toothless smile and crinkled face unmistakable. Her tiny frame is dressed in a soft rose tunic and paisley print pants casually rolled above bare feet, her hair placed in a bun with a hair band to keep it in place. Behind her comes her husband, almost as tiny as she – with his rock-star beard and

badger-hair styled into a quiff for the occasion.

Bentony explains what I already know: the couple are models for some of the portrait photography featured in the hotel. Their names are Nguyen Thi Loi, whose sprightly *joie de vivre* belies her 86 years, and her 92-year-old husband Le Van So. After receiving a present of biscuits, Nguyen offers a comment that makes all the Vietnamese burst out laughing. Bentony translates: “But how can I eat them if I don’t have any teeth!”

The couple clasp hands and welcome their visitors, before showing us through their humble home and into their garden. The neat allotment patches contain sweet-scented herbs and vegetables including mint, lettuce, basil and spring onion, as well as many I can’t identify. They demonstrate the watering system – it looks rudimentary, with two pails hung on either end of a wooden pole that rests on the shoulders, but it’s an acquired skill of balance and core strength that I don’t quite master with my own clumsy, sloshing attempt.

Reluctantly our time with this ever-smiling duo comes to an end, and we hop back on our bikes to the Thu Bon

River bank where we gingerly step down into rounded bamboo boats. Their strange appearance dates back to the arrival of French colonialists, who

began levying taxes on boat ownership – taxes that were unaffordable to the majority of Vietnamese fisherman, who needed such vessels for their livelihood.


The locals therefore cunningly invented a new kind of vessel: the





thung chai, arguing (not unfairly) that they were more like baskets than boats and so couldn't be charged. The crafty plan worked, though as we soon discover, steering a circular boat also requires a special technique. Luckily our guide has mastered this over a lifetime and takes us on a pleasant tour through waterways flanked by towering coconut palms, and past other local fishermen casting their nets and foraging in the small pools for purple crabs.

After disembarking, we walk a little way to Con Nhan Village and Sabirama, a local restaurant and cooking school. The idyllic venue is situated in a large garden, complete with a long dining table for large groups, an alfresco cooking station and a relaxing pagoda in the middle of a large pond filled with koi carp. Using local ingredients, dishes and utensils, our diminutive cooking teacher shows us how to wield our woks without singeing our eyebrows as giant flames leap out of the pan. The results are pretty fantastic, if I do say so myself, and we gobble up our creations of crispy Vietnamese pancakes with bean sprouts and fresh rice paper rolls filled with prawns and herbs. (Sabirama offers complete day tours that include many local activities, including a visit to the local market, basket boat trip, cooking class and a ride in a buffalo cart for US\$45 per person; restauranthoian.com).

By the end of my two-day sojourn in Hoi An I still can't speak any Vietnamese, but I have managed to forge a connection with the place, its history and the beautiful people that live there. I take home with me a renewed sense of calm, and a reminder that simple pleasures are some of the best things in life. 

An overnight stay in a Junior Suite Balcony, Club Wing room at La Siesta Hoi An Resort & Spa in mid-May starts from US\$136 per night; lasiestaresorts.com

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