

## Six Nights in Hanoi

In July I travelled to Hanoi for a short break between jobs to recharge my batteries. It is very invigorating to get up to the hustle and bustle of Asia (I also travelled through HK); it certainly puts Sydney and Australia into perspective. One criticism I have always had of Sydney is that it is very self centred about its own little affairs and travelling to a larger busier pond certainly brings that home to you. It is very refreshing to travel to a place where in comparison the largest Australian property companies would be two-bit players serving as spelling paddocks for personnel more interested in getting their CV into order to secure a lucrative expat positioning in Dubai.

Enough of Sydney – lets get onto Hanoi. Hanoi is centred on the Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Restored Sword). It is surprisingly pleasant (OK not up close) for a body of still water in the middle of a large tropical city. There are many aspects around the lake and it becomes very easy to navigate using it as a major landmark.

The island temple in the middle of the lake is called the Thap Rua (Tortoise Tower). The lake was so named due to a golden tortoise who took back a magical sword that had been used to drive the invading Chinese from Vietnam.



The French colonial influence can still be seen with the tree lined boulevards and much of the older architecture. However the city is distinctively Asian with an identifiable Chinese influence.

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I did a day trip to Halong Bay, this is that amazing bay filled with (mostly) small limestone islands, it is incredibly picturesque and a one day trip doesn't do it justice.

My tourist boat trip got off to an interesting start as our boat captain backed into another smaller tourist boat (thankfully empty). There was the sound of splintering timbers and smashing glass, followed by a lot of yelled Vietnamese between the two boats featuring the sort of vocabulary not featured in the Lonely Planet guidebook.

The legend is that the bay was formed as a dragon rescued the Vietnamese from an attack. His thrashing tail caused mountains to crumble, forming the islets. Halong Bay translates to "Bay of the Descending Dragon".

In reality the islands are the remnant of a large limestone plateau (which also comprises most of North Vietnam) that is slowly being eroded. Some islands reach 200 metres in height.

The bay is the home to the Tarasque who is a legendary sea monster (relative of the Wagy) unfortunately my tourist trip didn't get me to close to him. A couple of photos and I could have paid off my mortgage.



This is serious "Pirates of the Caribbean" territory and you almost expect to see a square rigged ship sail into sight. I wouldn't be surprised if the locals had supplemented their income in the past with this activity. Furthermore as the bay is relatively shallow (6-10 metres) it would have made a good hideout for the local ships but not larger sea going vessels.

The islands being limestone also have caves and we visited one of the larger islands where we were able to walk through some of these caves.

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On my first full day I went to the Temple of Literature. This was Vietnam's first University, established in 1076 and was dedicated to scholars and men of literary achievement.

This led to one of those "Meanwhile in Ireland Nothing was Happening" moments when you realise that while the Vietnamese were establishing universities my ancestors were stomping around in the mud lopping off heads with broadswords.

The weather was very hot (OK I had picked the hottest month to travel), around 35°C and very humid. Inside the complex the air was very still and the heat got a bit much after a while. Most of Hanoi closes for two hours around midday and in this weather it made perfect sense so I joined in. I fail to see why I should join the Mad Dogs and Englishmen when I could be having a little lie down in an air conditioned room.

Hanoi has numerous temples and pagodas and most date back over a number of centuries, although some have been extensively rebuilt/repared after the last century's conflicts.

The One Pillar Pagoda Dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, although it was rebuilt after the French blew it up as a farewell present. It resembles a lotus blossom with its single pillar.

Also like many of the temples and pagodas that I visited around Hanoi it is quite small and intimate. This is in contrast to Thailand's temples which all seem to vie for attention with their splendour and grandioseness.

The temples and pagodas have many decorations and the detail up close is just as interesting as the overall vista. The Chinese influence can be seen in many of the decorations.

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I enjoyed the culture more than I thought I would and found many of the temples and museums more interesting than the shopping. Much of the fabric shopping is similar to Cabramatta apart from the price differential.

I visited the Hoa Lo Prison Museum which was the main jail for political prisoners when the French were the colonial power. The jail was also used during the American/Vietnam war and colloquially called the “Hanoi Hilton”. Much of the original jail complex is still intact however there is a new office building and apartment tower over part of the original site, called the Hanoi Towers.

I didn't take a photo of the main gateway as there was a Japanese tour bus parked in the way.

I went to the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre which was delightful, even though the commentary was in Vietnamese there was a multilingual programme (free too) and it was easy to follow. All the (Vietnamese) children in the audience loved it. It is very colourful and there was group of musicians and singers providing an accompaniment.

There are a number of museums in Hanoi and most are certainly worth seeing. The army (Military History) museum details all Vietnam's major conflicts (and there are more than the 20<sup>th</sup> century ones we learnt about) plus there is a fabulous sculpture comprised of remnants of shot down planes, shot up tanks and generally deconstructed military hardware.

The Fine Arts Museum is a must see if you are into anything on the artistic front. The displays range right back to prehistory, with ceramics, textiles, carvings, paintings, etc. I could have spent much longer there.

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The Hoan Kiem Lake (as I mentioned earlier) is a centre for the city and the vista changes as the light changes, this is an evening shot.



I had a very good time and found it surprisingly easy to get around for a single white woman. I certainly would go back.



On my way back I stopped for two days in Hong Kong and had a room with a fabulous view of the peak where I noticed birds (hawk/kite, if anyone knows what sort please tell me) which were taking full advantage of the air currents as we were getting some effect of a typhoon going through Taiwan. It did strike me as incongruous as I sat on my window seat and watched the birds that I was in the middle of a shopping paradise and I had taken up bird watching.