

Travel to feed your soul

Discover, explore and reflect in Vietnam

By Claire McErlane

Vietnam is, without doubt, a spectacular destination that has something for everyone. Here you will find yourself immersed in the beauty and culture of this diverse land, Asia's most vibrant destination. It is blessed with breathtaking natural beauty of sparkling emerald bays, towering limestone islands, jungles, dramatic mountains, greener-than-green rice paddies and exciting modern and ancient historic cities. And don't forget about the delicious local cuisine and fantastic shopping!

Sadly, many organised tours 'skim the surface' and cover the whole country in fourteen days. If you want to get the best out of your holiday, I highly recommend taking the time to see more of a couple of regions, rather than rushing your itinerary. This is when you can truly immerse yourself in the local culture, meet the locals and make your special holiday memories.

We chose to explore North and Central Vietnam over fourteen days, starting north in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city since the reunification between North and South in 1976. A combination of 1000 years of history and influence of French architecture has produced a charming old-world city rich in cultural relics and ... full of scooters and motorbikes!

Try to work your itinerary to include a Sunday in Hanoi, when local families congregate around the famous picturesque Hoan Kiem Lake to play traditional games, or early mornings to catch locals doing tai chi. Everything about the peaceful activities around the lake I describe as 'innocent' and typical of the gentle Vietnamese people.

Not to be missed is the interesting Hanoi Hilton 'Hoa Lo Prison', built by the French between 1886-1901 to hold political prisoners, and then used during the American War to hold POWs (this is where politician, the late John McCain spent over five years).

The Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum is extremely popular with locals and tourists alike – so allow plenty of time and be prepared to wait (sometimes a couple of hours) to gain entry.

A cyclo ride, or a motorbike tour of the city is a must, as is a visit to the Sofitel Metropole for an afternoon Chocolate Buffet – pure

indulgence fit for a king! Another must do, but surprisingly many tourists miss, is a show at the historic Hanoi Opera House. Here we were treated to a mesmerising 'cirque-style' show depicting traditional village life featuring numerous incredible acrobats with rubber-like spines.

No visit to Hanoi is complete without going to the fascinating Old Quarter and its colourful night markets, with all the sights, sounds and smells one expects to experience in Vietnam.

Next, we did an overnight cruise on Halong Bay amidst amazing towering 'karsts' (limestone islets) spread across 150kms. We cruised on a traditional junk and enjoyed excellent cuisine, relaxed on board, visited a cave, beach and a fishing village and even did a 6am tai chi session.

Our next stop was overnight in Hoa Lu, Vietnam's ancient capital in the stunning Ninh Binh province (no resemblance to NSW's Nin Bin!). Sadly not many westerners visit this region, also known as Halong Bay on Land. Here you can cruise the stunning wetlands and explore water caves on a traditional sampan boat.

Alluring Hue (pronounced 'Whay') in central Vietnam is a must. It is well-known for its severe weather, with boiling hot summer days and endless rainy weeks in winter, so choose your timing well. Originally not part of Vietnam but a part of the Kingdom of Champa, over the centuries the people have carved their own culture and cuisine unique to them. It is also said the ladies of Hue were the most beautiful in the land.

Don't miss a tour of Hue's intriguing Citadel, a wonderful dragon boat dinner cruise on the Perfume River, and the best cyclo ride or vespa tour you can do.

The picturesque drive from Hue down to Hoi An includes the spectacular Hai Van Pass, climbing 496m on a road quoted on TV's Top Gear as "a deserted ribbon of perfection – one of the best roads in the world".

Our final destination, indeed the 'grand finale' in my book, was fairytale-like Hoi An, an ancient town recognized by UNESCO in 1999. Steeped in history, the cultural



influences of the Japanese and Chinese merchants are still evident today, with the famous Japanese Covered Bridge and the distinctly Chinese atmosphere of the Old Quarter. Lining the narrow streets are two-storey Chinese shops with charming wooden facades, merchants' homes and colourful temples.



Claire McErlane originally fell in love with Australia as a backpacker in the late 80s. Today, Claire operates Uplift Tours and Travel in Caboolture. When Claire is not travelling she enjoys being at home with their rescued horses, cats, chickens and their huge dog, Cara.



Evenings take on a festival-like atmosphere in this town, with the kaleidoscope of different coloured lanterns lighting up all the streets and alleyways. The markets are bustling and the cafes and restaurants buzzing.

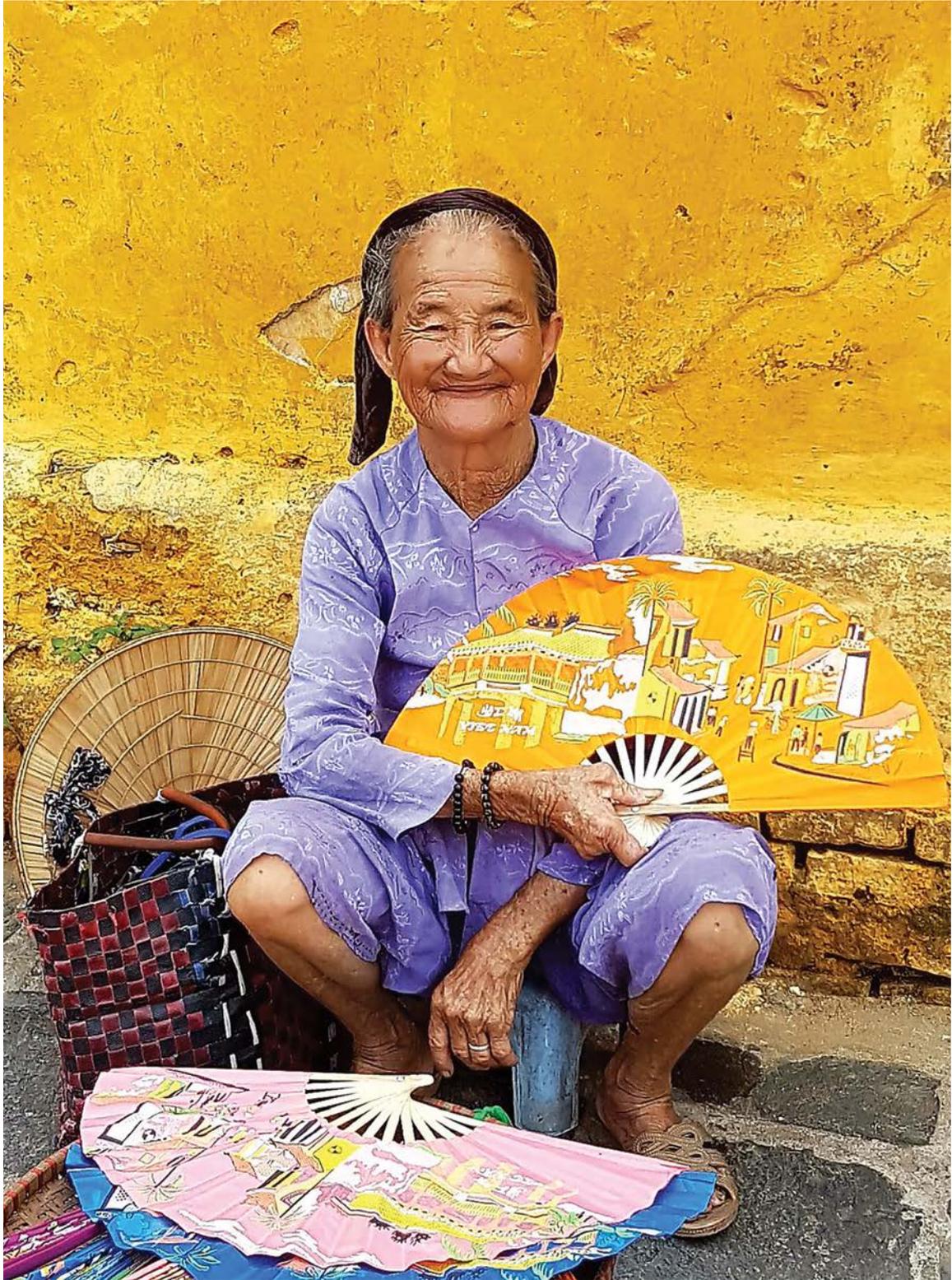
Hoi An is amazing for cheap shopping, quality tailors at reasonable prices and cheap

prescription glasses, and has a huge array of good local and western eateries. Don't miss the great food at Lantern Town or Vinh Hung restaurants, or if you're looking for a good coffee check out the Hoi An Roastery.

Vietnam is truly captivating. With colourful yet sometimes tragic history, her people today are gentle yet have proven themselves

resilient, having needed to defend their land numerous times from invaders.

Whether you're a history buff, seeking a beach holiday, wish to go trekking, enjoy cultural experiences or love shopping for a bargain, Vietnam offers the ultimate experience for the traveller, and I'm already planning my next trip!



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