

Asia Concierge



CONCIERGE COLLECTION

DAY TRAVEL PROGRAMS TO INSPIRE



VIETNAM



ASIA-CONCIERGE.COM





HOW WE DEFINE TRAVEL TODAY

It is all too easy to travel to the main centres of a destination and consider having ‘seen it’. However, the true backbone of Asia’s culture and society is found in the unknown, the unaware, the places and areas where throngs of tourists do not tread because, quite simply, the knowledge and insight is not there to begin with. This is where we come in.

As tourism in the region expands and develops, most of us yearn for a travel experience away from the commercial centres. We have therefore carefully researched and created a series of select experiences that best represent another side of Asia ... an Asia that will enrich a trip with memories, an experience and an education.

This is about travelling with style, a high degree of comfort but, at the same time, being out of ones comfort zone to formulate a travel experience that will enrich a visit with insights and exchanges that will, hopefully, prove to be the highlight of your customer’s stay in this enigmatic region.

Ranging from adventurous to the moderate, our concierge collection of travel programs are either half or full day experiences from the main centres and are therefore easily placed into a client’s base itinerary.

Please contact our Vietnam office for pricing and to discuss any custom options to meet your client’s exact needs.

Thank you for travelling with us on this armchair journey.

The Asia Concierge Team



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DAY TRAVEL PROGRAMS TO INSPIRE

VIETNAM

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Above left : Hanoi
Grand Opera House

Above right : Cycling
along Long Bien bridge

Below : A typical
neighbourhood street
scene.

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the
merits and attractions of this program.



Alleys and Architecture

AN ALTERNATIVE WALKING EXPLORATION OF HANOI'S NEIGHBOURHOODS

 CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY | ACTIVE

Depart : 0800 / Return : 1730

Today we immerse ourselves in the somewhat chaotic but intoxicating street life and architecture of Vietnam's capital city.

We begin at one of Hanoi's most striking buildings. Standing in the heart of Hanoi, the Opera House was completed in 1911 after 10 years of construction, by two French architects, Broyer and V. Harley, resembling the Opéra Garnier de Paris. Although not open to the public outside of performances it may be possible to have a sneak peak inside with the assistance of your Travel Expert.

Whilst most visitors would head north of here to the commercial Hoan Kiem Lake area, we wander south into the more traditional neighbourhoods. A short stroll down a tree lined street takes us to the Hanoi University of Medicine.

Formerly called the Indochina Medical College, it was founded in 1902 and was the first modern university in Vietnam. The facade of the building is a stunning example of French/Vietnamese architecture of the time.

Continuing our stroll, we enter the small flower garden Pasteur park, named after the nearby Statue of Louis Pasteur, the revered French chemist and microbiologist. Opposite lies the Institute of Epidemiology and is another prime example of captivating French architecture in central Hanoi that has been well preserved.

From here we cross down various side streets bustling with commercial activity until we reach the small Ha Ba Trung lake. Across it lies a pristine temple dedicated to the two Trung Sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, in Vietnam. The Trung Sisters were military leaders who rebelled against Chinese domination. Instead of surrendering and accepting their defeat at the hands of Chinese, they decided to drown themselves and have been revered since then for their courage and strength.

We take a break here for lunch at a local restaurant.

After lunch we visit Quan Thanh temple. Established during the Ly dynasty (1010–1028). Quan Thanh is a Taoist temple lying as a gateway to the vast West Lake area and is considered one of the finest examples of religious architecture in the city.

A short stroll takes us to the French built Roman Catholic church of Cua Bac. Built in 1932, Cua Bac is one of the three major churches of Hanoi designed with significant influence from the Art Deco movement of the times, reflecting the marriage between French and Vietnamese architecture.

From here we continue our walk along Phan Dinh Phung Street, known as one of the most romantic roads in Hanoi, with ancient dracontomelum trees along the sidewalks. It can be argued that there is no finer street in all 'Indochina' for its gorgeous villas and historical buildings.

A short 1km away we reach the French built water tower and head into the northern section of the Old Quarter. Nearby lies Long Bien Bridge and train station. Once considered the pride, symbol of architecture in the Far East when completed in 1902, a short walk across part of the bridge opens up the Red River in full view and life across it.

As the afternoon gets busier we embark on a 20 minute cyclo (rickshaw) ride through the less touristed parts of the Old Quarter through to Nha Tho church where the program concludes. We can leave you to explore the Old Quarter or return you to your hotel.

Note : If the heat or distance of walking is an issue then and part of the program can be substituted by cyclo.





French Fusion

DISCOVERING THE CHARMS OF HANOI'S UNIQUE INDOCHINESE ARCHITECTURE BY VINTAGE CAR

CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY

Depart : 0800 / Return : 1200

Your Travel Expert will meet you in the lobby of your hotel and escort you to the beautiful Citroen Traction (or similar) that will navigate you through Hanoi's French Quarter today. This classic car was one of the revolutionary automobiles of the 20th Century. Immortalized in many classic French films, it was the vehicle of choice for the French Indochinese Government and continues to be a style icon to this day.

Once introduced to your driver, smartly presented in uniform, flat cap, and driving gloves, it's time to hit the road to discover Hanoi's French architectural heritage.

The first stop is at the State Bank of Vietnam, formerly the Bank of Indochina in Tonkin (North Vietnam during colonial times). Built in 1930 by Georges-André Found. We suggest stretching your legs and walking the next short section (1km) to our next 4 stops, the first being just around the corner.

The State Guest House is grand and imposing building, formerly the residence of the French colonial Governor of Tonkin. After the 1945 revolution, it became the office of Ho Chi Minh's government prior to the return of the French. Today it serves as a guest-house for the Vietnamese Government.

Continuing on foot we reach Hanoi's most eminent hotel, the Sofitel Legend Metropole. Built in 1901. This legendary hotel has born witness to the turbulent history of Indochina yet, to this day, it continues to exude an air of calm and colonial luxury.

Nearby is the National Historical Museum, one of Hanoi's most interesting pieces of architecture. During French times it was the École Française d'Extrême-Orient. It's an outstanding example of the Indochine architectural style.

Another short walk brings you to the Hanoi Opera House. Perhaps Hanoi's most photographed landmark. Hanoi's Opera House was inspired by the architecture of the Garnier Opera House in Paris, it opened in 1911 after ten years of work, it is considered by many to be the capital's most elegant building.

Returning to your vehicle, continue to the Hanoi University of Medicine, it was founded in 1902 and was the first modern university in Vietnam. The facade of the building is a stunning example of French/Vietnamese architecture of the time. Next stop is the neo-classical Supreme People's Court. This is the highest judicial body of the Social Republic of Vietnam.

Moving on, you arrive at the Neo-Gothic Saint Joseph Cathedral, inaugurated in 1886. Built on the land of a demolished pagoda, the Cathedral became a symbol of colonisation and contempt.

Returning to the Citroen you head north to a one of Hanoi's most romantic roads. Phan Dinh Phung Street, with its ancient dracontomelum trees along the sidewalks offers a retreat from the city. It can be argued that there is no finer street in all 'Indochina' for its gorgeous villas and historical buildings.

A short drive away we reach the French built water tower and nearby lies Long Bien Bridge. Once considered the pride, symbol of architecture in the Far East when completed in 1902, a short walk across part of the bridge opens up the Red River in full view and life across it and is the perfect view to conclude your tour.

Thereafter your car returns to the hotel.



HANOI
VIETNAM



Above left : Faculty of Medicine

Above right : French vintage cars

Below : The Grand Hanoi Opera House

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Above left : Entering the main courtyard at dusk

Above right : The altar of Confucius

Below : Khue Van Cuc pavilion at dusk

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.



The Temple of Literature after dark

AN EXCLUSIVE PRIVATE EVENING VISIT TO THE TEMPLE OF LITERATURE

 CULTURAL

Depart : 1800 / Return : 2000

* Operates Monday through Wednesday only

Hanoi flaunts an endless amount of history, grandeur, and mythical tales to enchant even the most seasoned traveller. One such treasure is Hanoi's ancient Temple of Literature Vietnam's first national university. One of the most incredible aspects is that after almost 1000 years – through multiple wars and restorations – the Temple of Literature has still retained its original architectural style and character. It is a highly recommended attraction to visit – to wander through its gardens and pavilions where ancient scholars studied and to admire the grand trees that have witnessed centuries of Vietnamese history.

Whilst the complex is often very busy with visitors during the day, it remains closed to the public at dusk and once the crowds have dissipated and the evening light turns soft and dark, the Temple of Literature takes on an atmosphere of architectural and historical splendour that few get to experience in solitude. It is only with particular permission arranged by **Asia Concierge** that allows our guests this special privilege.

We enter the complex from its main gate, walking through its softly lit pathways and courtyards with your Travel Expert. The Temple of Literature is divided into five courtyards. The first two courtyards are where scholars would relax amidst the large trees and manicured lawns. The second courtyard is easily recognisable by the Khue Van Cac – a wooden, red pavilion built on four white stone columns and has an elaborate roof with two circular windows and a brass bell. The bell is only rung on auspicious occasions.

Entering the third courtyard we are greeted with a glass of champagne as we admire the two large halls on either side that house the treasured Stelae of Doctors. The Stelae are turtle statues – carved out of bluestone – with the names and birthplaces of all 1307 graduates from 82 separate Royal examinations.

The fourth courtyard is where you find altars to Confucius and his disciples. The fifth courtyard, where the actual academy was, was not added until 1076 when Emperor Ly Nhan Tong ordered the construction of the Imperial Academy. Today, there are several exhibits here with a statue of Chu Van An, one of the Academy's rectors and a beloved figure in Vietnamese history for his dedication to teaching. There are also numerous cultural events held at the hall in this courtyard, as well as displays of old uniforms that the scholars wore while studying there.

The Imperial Academy operated until 1779 when the Nguyen dynasty founded the new capital in Hue and established a new academy. It then functioned as a district school until 1906 – until the French designated it a historical monument.

We can wander freely and to sit and absorb the atmosphere before exiting the complex from one of the side gates. From there we are escorted to our dinner venue or return to the hotel.





Above: Hanoi street scene



Above left : Vinh Phuc street market


Above right : Chef Ai at home in her kitchen

Below : Vinh Phuc community



Cooking with authenticity

AN INTIMATE COOKING CLASS IN A TRADITIONAL HANOI NEIGHBOURHOOD

 CULTURAL

Depart : 0900 / Return : 1400

Vinh Phuc district lies hidden away close to the banks of Hanoi's vast West Lake. It is rarely visited by foreign tourists and thus, provides a genuine, commercial free experience of residential life that is both colourful and fascinating.

Densely populated, Vinh Phuc is home to large, Soviet era built, apartment blocks that are surprisingly pleasing on the eye in their ochre colour look and shaded by thick native trees that characterise the area. As there are no through roads, traffic is minimal and the streets are peaceful, making it ideal to wander and explore.

The local market spills along both the main and side streets with other shops and trade occupying almost every square metre. It is a touch of old Hanoi, before tourism and very much how life remains on its outskirts.

Upon arrival in Vinh Phuc, our Travel Expert will guide you through these engaging streets and introduce you to daily life activities of its residents. After our exploration we end up at a quaint little house on a street corner that is home to Ms. Ai - our host and local resident chef. Ms. Ai is a passionate chef with more than 15 years of experience. Before being cast in the local spot light in the top 5 of Master Chef Vietnam in 2014, she worked as a helper for foreign families and was in charge of planning the menu for private parties at homes of dignitaries and expatriates.

Once our introductions are over, Ms. Ai escorts the guests to the local street market to purchase items for the today's cooking class. Watch tofu being made and shaped into pliable white girders, ready to be cooked with tomato sauce. See stalls heaving with tiny clams; baskets of colourful chillies and limes; delicious and sweet jackfruit (best fried in flour with coconut milk); plumes of banana flower; sacks of lotus seeds to make puddings, and giant live catfish that periodically made a bid for freedom from their giant bowls.

After the market visit, guests return to Chef Ai's house to participate in the cooking class. In her cozy kitchen, you can feel her passion for cooking and be guided through the cultural meaning of North Vietnam's most popular dishes.

Vietnam is home to a plethora of cooking classes and schools but nearly all are focused on group tourism and, whilst attractive in their own right, they cannot compare to the level of authenticity, genuine charm and engagement that comes from Chef Ai, her delightful little home and the atmosphere of a traditional Hanoi neighbourhood. This is how cooking classes should be.



Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Hanoi's West Lake Art, History & Religion

BICYCLE ALONG WEST LAKE, PRIVATE TAI CHI CLASS AND PAGODA BREAKFAST

CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY | ACTIVE

Depart : 07:00 / Return : 12.00

An early start this morning as we depart the hotel for short drive (20 mins) through Hanoi's back roads as it weaves along the nearby shoreline of West Lake.

We arrive at the rarely visited by foreign visitors, but widely considered one of Hanoi's most renowned spiritual sites, Van Nien Pagoda. Although the pagoda is not large, it is situated near the West Lake so it has a spacious and serene landscape with its beautiful teak timber columns and walls generating a warm and calming atmosphere.

Originally built in 1014, the pagoda has experienced several restorations, but it still maintains typical architectural features and objects which have great historical and artistic value, including 46 round statues, including 26 Buddha statues, 20 statues of Mother Goddesses and late patriarchs and two stone bells dating back to the Nguyen Dynasty.

By arriving early in the morning there is the opportunity for the energetic to join with the locals in some Tai Chi at the pagoda or even a meditation class to absorb the quiet Buddhist ambience.

Note :

Pending the requirements from our guests, we are also able to arrange a private Tai Chi lesson with a local instructor.

For something a little special we are able to arrange a private breakfast inside the courtyard of the pagoda, consisting of croissants, pastries, juices, tea and coffee after the Tai Chi class.

Outside the pagoda, our bicycles await to continue the remainder of the journey following the foreshore of the lake. Hanoi's largest freshwater lake, West Lake has a circumference of 17km and houses many of the city's historic places of interest around its perimeter – including Vietnam's four sacred temples, but is also filled with small lanes and alleys that beckon exploration.

These paths often lead us to local street markets, garden cafes, art galleries and various other places of interest far away from the tourist trail. Cycling around the perimeter of the lake allows us to make numerous impromptu stops as our Travel Expert immerses you into local life in what is considered a more 'well to do' part of Hanoi.

Continuing our cycle ride we enter a peninsula on the lake that is home to the revered Phu Tay Ho pagoda. The small alleyway leading to the gate is lined with colourful vendors and stalls selling snacks such as Banh tom, which is prawns cooked on a thick batter base before freshly refrying. There are also cakes, fruit, sweets, and paraphernalia for making offerings at the temple, such as incense and paper money.

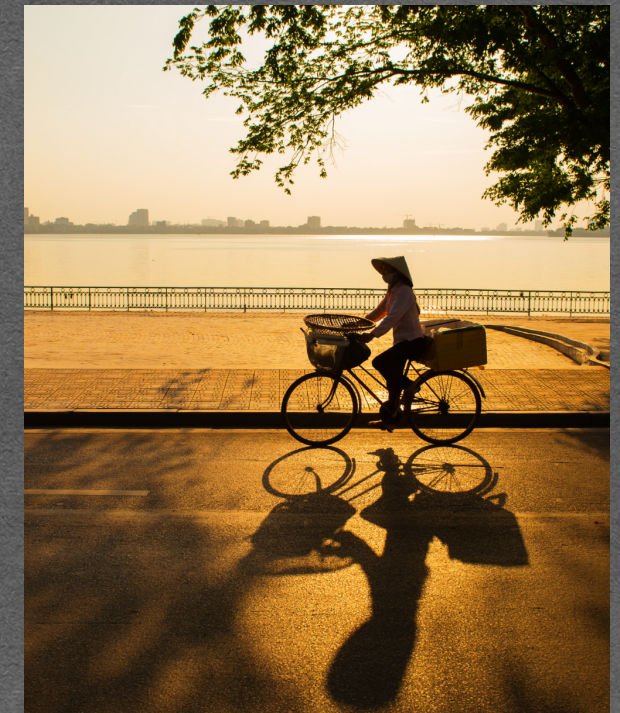
Originally built in the 17th Century, recent restoration work has given Tay Ho Temple a modern air that contrasts with the wonderful, ancient banyan tree nearby. Depending on the time of year and the day, the pagoda can get crowded with local worshippers who come here from throughout the region to offer incense and worship for luck, peace and healthy children.

The final cycle section to the end of the lake is short and, for the coffee drinker, there is no shortage of local cafes where we can stop to enjoy a local beverage as we overlook the still waters of the lake.

Return to the hotel thereafter or continue on to lunch venue (not included).



HANOI
VIETNAM



Above left : Private breakfast in pagoda courtyard

Above right : Cycling along West Lake

Below : Tai Chi lessons

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Above : The Architecture of Hue Citadel.



Above : Entering the gates of Hue Citadel



Above : Hoi An's morning market



Top Left : A Hoi An market scene in the morning

Top Right : Le Nghia Pagoda

Bottom : Beautiful merchant home found in the side alleys

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.



Hoi An Morning Glory

EXPLORING THE OLD WORLD CHARM OF HOI AN BEFORE TOURISM WAKES

CULTURAL | ACTIVE

Depart : 0700 / Return : Open

The best way to avoid the negative impacts of mass tourism - go against the flow, and this is exactly what we do here to experience the old town the way the local inhabitants do for an authentic and insightful experience.

We start off on our exploration earlier (recommend no later than 7am) from the end of the French Quarter of Hoi An at Phan Boi Chau Street. This is one of the less commercial areas of the township where distinguished French colonial buildings line both sides of the streets, full of colour and history.

The road leads into the edge of the old market where we wander and explore the many vibrant stalls, full of floral displays and the greenest of vegetables. The market at this time is almost devoid of foreign tourists, for it is the one time in its day that is made for the locals to browse and shop. The fish market section faces the river where fisherman have unloaded their overnight catch but we need to be there at first light to see this side of the market in full swing.

As we weave through the busy alleys and stalls, your Travel Expert will take time to point out the vast variety of food produce on offer. Some of it will be familiar, some of it much less so, but all of it fresh and delicious.

Exiting the market we follow the river and the line up of multiple colourful boats waiting for the tourist trade. Most of the shops and assembly halls are not open to visitors at this time but will begin to open up as we continue our walk. This is one part of the charm of Hoi An at this time of the morning - just watching the locals pulling open the shutters to their homes or sweeping their space outside, getting ready for trade to commence.

We continue our walk through the quiet streets of the old town and pass some of the finest examples of Hoi An's architecture, ancient Chinese houses, former warehouses converted into shops and museums, hidden temples, assembly halls, there are even some examples of Soviet inspired architecture from the communist times. These buildings hold so many stories and your travel expert will share these with you as you meander through the town.

Unbeknownst to many visitors are the small, tucked away, alley ways linking the main streets. These small lane ways always lead to somewhere interesting and out of the tourist eye. We crisscross some of the alleys and watch children leaving for school, adults attending prayer or hidden gardens, or a local noodle house serving steaming broth for breakfast.

After covering a fair amount of ground it is time to pause for a coffee break at one of the atmospheric cafes tucked away in hidden corners, all of which have a special quality about them. Discuss with your travel expert to make the stop that best suits your tastes.

After our refreshment we continue to visit some of the main attractions of the town just as Hoi An starts to see its first influx of visitors.

Return to your hotel or continue exploring some of the shops, with the satisfaction that you have just experienced Hoi An at its finest.





Farm, to Market, to Table

FARMING COMMUNITIES, MARKETS, CYCLING AND COOKING SCHOOL

CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY | ACTIVE

Depart : 0800 / Return : 1400

Your Travel Expert meets you in your hotel lobby and we transfer to Tra Que Village. Named after the sweet-scented herb that spices up the everyday meals of the locals, Tra Que is a small settlement, located on the edge of Hoi An, renowned for its organic gardens crammed with wonderfully fresh herbs, spices and vegetables.

Named after the sweet-scented herb that spices up the everyday meals of the locals, Tra Que is a small settlement, located on the edge of Hoi An, renowned for its organic gardens crammed with wonderfully fresh herbs, spices and vegetables.

Its an extremely pretty and tranquil place. We'll explore the gardens which are organised into dozens of pretty little plots and observe the local farmers at work. Then we spend time with a local farming family to learn about their daily lifestyle and to discover the flavours that create the fresh Vietnamese cuisine we will be making a little later. We'll join the farmers as they work on their vegetable gardens, assisting them as they prepare the land and fertilise it with seaweed. We also get our hands dirty with other gardening activities such as raking, sowing, watering greens, and picking greens. We'll take a few items to use in our lunch preparations later.

We pick up some bicycles and cycle through shaded neighbourhoods nestled among the rice fields stopping at a local Assembly House in the hamlet of An My. Communal Houses exist to worship gods, patron saints, wondering souls and heroes. They act as the centre of cultural activities for the whole village, playing a vital role in their spiritual life. Built in the early 19th century, this particular example of a Communal House has maintained its authentic appearance despite several renovations. We'll enjoy a short rest, an insight into traditional village institutions and culture, and a cool drink.

Moving on, we make a short cycle to Ba Le Market. This is a vibrant market away from the town's centre, it receives almost no tourists and is the perfect place for us to meet our cooking coach who walks us around the market introducing us to their favourite vendors and explaining about the fresh produce. You will have the chance to interact with the local vendors and also purchase the necessary ingredients to be used in your cooking lesson later.

The final leg of our cycle takes us to back into the picturesque countryside where we arrive at a small wooden pier where a local boat awaits to take us to our last destination for the day. We enjoy a leisurely cruise along the Thu Bon River to the cooking school. Relax now as we glide past water palms and large fishing nets before arriving at Red Bridge Cooking School.

Hoi An is renowned throughout Vietnam for its delicious culinary specialities and this morning's cooking class begins with an introduction to some of the region's best-known dishes.

You will tour the school's vegetable and herb garden before following the example of the local chef and preparing some of the dishes yourself. The class will last approximately 2 hours and will culminate with lunch and a short demonstration of Vietnamese vegetable carving and plate decoration.

We then return you by car to your hotel.



HOI AN
VIETNAM



Above left : Ba Le Market

Above right : Red Bridge Cooking School

Below : Cycling through Hoi An countryside

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Above left : Vespa transportation

Above right : Tok Restaurant

Below : Resident monk at Chuc Thanh Temple

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.



Bikes, Blessings, and Beverages

VESPA JOURNEY, MONKS CHANTING, RICE FIELD COCKTAILS

EXPLORATORY | UNUSUAL

Depart : 1600 / Return : 2030

In the late afternoon we meet our drivers with their vintage vespas on which we ride pinion through the streets of Hoi An and into the countryside on a beautiful journey of discovery. This is the perfect time for our ride as the late afternoon light enhances the colours and there is often plenty of activity in the fields.

Depending on the location of your hotel, we weave through the traffic and back streets of Hoi An's Old Town, or through narrow trails in the rice fields until reaching Chuc Thanh Temple.

This is one of the finest examples in Hoi An of a working temple that has maintained its true character while many have lost their old world charm due to overzealous restorations.

We can feel the magic of this place as soon as we pass through the ornate gate and enter the carefully manicured gardens. Your travel expert will take this opportunity to explain the practices and intricacies of Buddhism in Vietnam.

We coincide our visit with the resident monk's prayer time. This is a very moving experience that brings one merit and good fortune, it is a memory that will stay with you for the rest of your travels and beyond.

Returning to our vespas we embark on the last leg of our journey. As the golden light of the late afternoon embraces us, we venture into the countryside. We cruise through the rice fields before stopping for a coffee (or beverage of your choice) in a beautiful coffee shop hidden among the rice fields.

We then emerge onto a wonderful riverside trail full of interesting sights and activities. We drive past fishermen putting out their fish traps for the night, secluded villages, and agricultural scenes of everyday life.

Finally we reach our last stop, Tok is a wonderfully unique and elegant restaurant serving beautifully prepared fusion cuisine using the finest local ingredients. Literally in the middle of the rice fields, the location is sublime.

Relax on one of the lounge beds on the edge of the fields with the beverage of your choice and watch the sun melt into the horizon. Then investigate the creative menu and enjoy Tok's laid back fine dining experience on the terrace, under the stars.

Your driver awaits your return for the final ride back to your hotel, or maybe to a last venue in town for a nightcap?

Cruising on the vespas through the countryside under the stars is the final highlight of the evening. The frogs and crickets sing a song of farewell as we leave the rice fields and weave through residential neighbourhoods that lead us back to the resort.





Tombs & Temples

HUYEN TRAN PRINCESS TEMPLE, TU HIEU PAGODA, HO QUYEN, BAO QUOC PAGODA, GIA LONG TOMB

 CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY

Depart : 07.30 / Return : 17.30

A short drive takes us to the Huyen Tran Princess Temple, built in 2006 in honour of a local Princess who helped the Vietnamese consolidate their power over the Cham Empire. This is an exceptionally peaceful place full of gardens, pavilions, shrines and endless views in every direction. It is the perfect vantage point to gauge the full beauty of the environment of rolling hills dissected by the Perfume river.

Returning to our vehicle we follow a winding network of residential roads through leafy neighbourhoods bringing us to Tu Hieu Pagoda. This beautiful Zen temple is one of the most peaceful and atmospheric temples in Hue. Set among ornamental gardens, it is home to the graves of 30 Royal Eunuchs and is the temple where Vietnamese Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh grew up and was ordained. We endeavour to be here in time to catch the monks chanting which completes the ethereal charm of this special place.

We continue on small roads through pine forests, villages, cemeteries, and rural scenes to Ho Quyen (Tiger Arena), where Elephants, (symbolising Imperial rule) were forced to fight with Tigers (representing rebel forces) for royal entertainment. Nearby is the small, refreshingly under restored temple of Long Chau, which was used to pray for the elephants. In front is the picturesque lotus pool where they were bathed. This is a fascinating find tucked away among the cemeteries and villages close to the Perfume River.

Bao Quoc pagoda is our next stop and well off the tourist circuit. Dating back to 1670, its is one of Hue's oldest pagodas. It's an extraordinarily peaceful place and also has a monk training centre on the premises, if you have a special interest your Travel Expert endeavour to help you gain a deeper insight into the complexities of a monks life and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism with a chat with one of the senior monks.

We then return you to your hotel for lunch at leisure and some down time.

In the mid afternoon we board a boat and cruise along the peaceful Perfume River in search of Gia Long's resting place. Grand colonial buildings and the towers blocks of the city are soon replaced by local homes clinging to the river banks, there is little traffic on the river but we pass the occasional small vessel casting fishing nets or transporting goods along the way. It's a calm and enchanting experience

We moor our boat and say farewell to our small local crew and continue on the last leg of the journey by car. The road takes us past little villages, orchards and ancient tombs and shrines until the trail widens and passes through a forest of pine trees that are home to a low hill where Gia Long's tomb is to be found.

The remote and idyllic location of Gia Long's resting place makes it our favourite tomb to visit. Arriving in the late afternoon the light is wonderful and the trickle of visitors that do make it here have usually left, leaving you with a refreshing and tranquil atmosphere as your travel expert shows you around and explains the history of this historical state that served as the focal point for the development of Vietnamese art, culture and cuisine.

The program concludes after our visit as we return to central Hue.



HUE
VIETNAM



Above left : The Perfume River

Above right : Mandarin statues at the Emperor's tomb

Below : Monks chanting at Tu Hieu pagoda

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Above left : Van Phat (10,000 Buddha) Pagoda

Above right : A resting cyclo driver on the Saigon streets.

Below : A motorbike parking station in Chinatown.

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.



Calm and Chaos

AN ALTERNATIVE TOUR OF SAIGON'S FRENETIC CITYSCAPE ON VINTAGE VESPA

 CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY | UNUSUAL

Depart : 0800 / Return : 1230

Your guide and driver will pick you up from your hotel for this private customised adventure. All guides and drivers are well trained in all manners of health and safety and your comfort and security are their paramount concern!

After a quick briefing and helmet fitting, you hit the road and immediately find yourself in a moving sea of motor-cycles as you weave through the traffic! Stopping at the traffic lights for the first time, you are surrounded by a mass of people riding to work, making deliveries, or attending to important business, you will feel a part of this busy, bustling metropolis!

As the lights turn green you find yourself weaving through the traffic, turning off the busy main streets and down narrow alleyway where life literally unfolds on the streets.

First stop is a local market well off the tourist circuit. Your guide will walk you through the most vibrant areas stopping introduce various produce, converse with their favourite vendors, and offer you the opportunity to sample some exotic fruits or local deserts. The markets of Vietnam are some of the most absorbing in Asia full of activity and brimming with many weird and wonderful things.

Leaving the market behind we cruise through the busy streets and make a coffee stop at a small cafe in a pretty little local park.

We then drive through fashionable District 3, past the fancy villas and art galleries nestled among the tree lined streets. Your guide will take you to a stylish gallery that celebrates the work of up and coming young local talent.

Returning to the organised chaos of the streets we drive through busy Chinese quarter of Cho Lon. This is an area of fierce commerce and activity, it's like being in a busy open air market!

You take a rest from the bikes for a while and walk though a flower market. The vibrant colours and sweet scents are intoxicating as flowers from all over the country are bought and sold here.

Our final stop is a real oasis of calm in the city, Chua Van Phat (10,000 Buddha) Pagoda is located at the end of a busy alleyway. The rather inconspicuous entrance leads you into incense filled haven of peace and tranquility.

Spread over several floors there are literally thousands of Buddha statues and figures of all sizes organised into prominent positions and lined into alcoves set into the walls. It's a hidden gem tucked away in this thriving city.





Saigon Suburban Cuisine

RIVER BOAT, VESPA RIDE, CUISINE & COCKTAILS

EXPLORATORY | UNUSUAL

Depart : 16.30 / Return : 21.00

Saigon, for all its interest, is really confined to its central district for most visitors. And yet, beyond its boundaries lie interesting neighbourhoods with their own sophisticated culinary scene. One such neighbourhood is District 2, or commonly known as Thao Dien.

Long considered a 'wealthy' part of town, initially for resident expatriates and now middle class Vietnamese, D2, is filled with attractive streets, boutique home ware and furnishing stores, delightful cafes and gorgeous restaurants. Its culinary scene has grown in recent years to the level that applies more authenticity to its cooking geared towards a more discerning crowd.

D2 is best accessed from the river where our speed boat will whisk us to as the sun begins to fade for the day. We arrive at The Deck, perched on the banks of the Saigon River, for a delightful cocktail or two whilst watching late afternoon life come to a close from the comfort of our lounge chairs.

After our little 'pick me up' we meet our vespa drivers who will escort us through the treelined streets of the district passing the boutiques and grand homes the area is known for. This part of Saigon is more 'genteel' and therefore is delightful to cruise around on vespas in the evening.

After our suburban scooter ride we arrive at Laang Restaurant.

Laang is an Asian-inspired, vegetarian-friendly restaurant providing progressive urbanites an all-day healthy dining experience using fresh ingredients sourced locally

The name "Laang" is a re-adaptation of the Vietnamese word "lang yen", which means being still and calm among chaos. Inside, the decor is soothing shades of blue and green with wooden accents and gentle lighting. Orchids, potted plants and wired hanging lamps fill the space with a spa-like presence. Outside is a large patio with a koi pond, herb garden and decorative bells calling for relaxation.

The owners strive to make it a space for peaceful reconnection, where people connect meaningfully with others and themselves via healthy food.

Upon completion of our dinner we head back to the city centre by vehicle. There are local chic bars aplenty in downtown Saigon and your Travel Expert will be pleased to recommend some for a night cap within walking distance of your hotel.



HO CHI MINH CITY
VIETNAM



Above left : Laang Restaurant

Above right : The Deck interior

Below : The Deck on Saigon River

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.





Above left : Fresh flowers off to District Ten market

Above right : Incense coils at Quang Trieu Temple

Below : Opening the doors to Vinh Nghiem Pagoda

Click to hear your Travel Designer discuss the merits and attractions of this program.



Secret Saigon

FLOWER MARKET, QUANG TRIEU TEMPLE, VINH NGHIEM, PHU NHUAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

 CULTURAL | EXPLORATORY | ACTIVE

Depart : 0700 / Return : 1730

The program starts in early morning with a visit to a local flower market in District 10, where varieties of flowers are sold. This busy local market has about 100 trading households and is said to receive between 1,000-3000 flower boxes daily, depending on the season, which are then traded to buyers who visit from all areas of the city.

In the weeks leading up to the Lunar New Year (Jan-Feb), we will see boats ferrying their stock of fresh flowers up from the Mekong Delta. It's a colourful site.

As we head back towards the city we stop at Hoi Quan Quang Trieu Temple. With the large spiral incense coiling down from the roof and smoke slithering skyward this temple evokes a sense of serenity. The roar of the traffic from the busy street fades into the background as you step through the gates into the small courtyard. Looking up at the walls, you'll see surprisingly well-preserved tableaux along the top of the perimeter walls and above the facade of the pagoda. The figures are amazingly detailed and in surprisingly good condition.

A short car ride through the back streets takes us nearby to Tan Dinh Market. Built in 1926, Tan Dinh was originally known locally as the "rich market" because of its high-quality products and fresh foods matched with higher prices. Its original French built façade remains to this day and together with the brightly painted Tan Dinh Church opposite, it is reminder of the architectural value the French brought to this city.

In the heart of the city we visit the building where the last helicopter evacuated employees of the U. S. Government. This apartment building became an icon of the Fall of Saigon in 1975. A Dutch photographer, Hubert van Es, working for UPI, took the famous photograph that captured the last chaotic days of the war.

Whilst not normally accessible to the public, subject to special advance permission, a visit to this rooftop may be organized for our guests.

We then break for lunch at a hidden cafe/restaurant well regarded for its atmosphere and local cuisine. It is very likely we will be the only foreign guests there!

In the afternoon we head across to nearby Phu Nhuan district where we find the largest Mahayana pagoda in the city. Vinh Nghiem pagoda is a center for Buddhist beliefs and practices and considered the city's most prominent religious site. Meaning 'Ever Solemn', Vinh Nghiem pagoda is fairly young, having been built over a span of seven years, from 1964 to 1971 with the assistance of the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association and hence, fuses Japanese influence with traditional Vietnamese architecture.

After our visit here our driver will drop us off at a small secondary road in Phu Nhuan district (found half way to the airport). From here we disembark on foot to explore a typical residential neighbourhood. Family run shops and stores intermingle with hidden cafes, local schools, district police stations, hair salons, street vendors and some delightful and quirky residential homes.

A short stroll takes us to a 'garden café' where we stop for a quick coffee, no doubt filled with young, local professionals and students, before we continue past a community pagoda that is nestled beside a train track and onto the local Tran Huu Trang market. There are no tourists here, this is purely a colourful local market filled with the hustle of trade and commerce but on a smaller scale.

Interesting alleys and laneways crisscross each other before we leave the enclave and are met by our driver towards the main road. From here we journey back into the city centre and finish our day having seen sites most visitors never get to see and experience.



