



HOI AN STREET SCENE

Audley's Vietnam

Tessa Williams, one of Audley's Indochina Specialists, highlights how she experienced the best of Vietnam.



PHAN THIET

An ancient legend tells the story of a dragon who was the mother of Vietnam itself creating the thousands of limestone islets with several swooshes of her long dragon's tail

On my first visit to Vietnam I spent several months on the backpacker trail and came to the conclusion that the best way to experience all that this long thin country has to offer is to travel the length of it from north to south. Many companies in the UK now provide tours following this route but on my recent trip back to one of my favourite destinations in Asia I managed to discover some exciting new twists on the way. Our attention to detail enables Audley travellers to experience the highlights of Vietnam without just being one of the crowd in an increasingly popular holiday destination.

Arriving into the capital Hanoi, my first stop was the new Museum of Ethnology. A contrast from many of the dusty museums to be found in Asia, this modern building houses some superb exhibits displaying examples of the costumes, houses and tools used by the many minorities in the highlands of Vietnam.

Taking a break from the city, the amazing seascape of Halong Bay is an unmissable sight. An ancient legend tells the story of a dragon who was the mother of Vietnam itself creating the thousands of limestone islets with several swooshes of her long dragon's tail. Many experience this UNESCO protected site as a unfulfilling day trip or by overnighing in one of the very ordinary hotels on the mainland but a unique way to experience Halong Bay is to stay on one of the traditional Vietnamese junks which sail on the bright turquoise sea. The two day, one night cruise will show you much of the beautiful karst scenery including the caves, isolated beaches and islands of the bay.

The centre of Vietnam is now a popular region both for cultural touring and beach stays which means some of the main sights can be crowded. However, accompanied by my guide, we found some great ways to explore this part of the country with only local Vietnamese as company! In addition to visiting the citadel and ancient tombs in Hue, we took part in a fascinating cookery class where we learnt how to create traditional Hue delicacies in a private home renowned for its collection of rare antique 'Bleu de Hue' ceramics. We also discovered a very local way to explore the infamous De-Militarized Zone. Previously only accessible via a long day excursion by road from Hue, we took a leisurely trip which began with a journey on the Reunification



FLOATING MARKET, MEKONG DELTA

This is 'picture postcard' Vietnam with its verdant rice paddies being worked by farmers in their conical hats, its bustling floating markets and untouched rural lifestyle

Express train to the Vinh Moc Tunnels. These are the DMZ's most interesting site and far less visited than those at Cu Chi in the south. After lunch at the picturesque Cua Tung beach, we



A JUNK IN HALONG BAY

returned to Hue by road, crossing the Ben Hai river, once the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam, en route. Heading down the coast over the stunning Hai Van mountain pass, we visited Hoi An. This enchanting riverside town consists of a maze of cobbled backstreets, wooden merchant houses and tiny Chinese temples. It is famed for its tailors but it is the unique local cuisine and laid back atmosphere

which really makes it memorable.

Continuing further South, the lively metropolis of Saigon offers a surprisingly modern, fast paced life along with several worthwhile sights. However, it is the Mekong Delta, south of Saigon, which represents a real opportunity to gain an insight into rural Vietnam. In many ways, this is 'picture postcard' Vietnam with its verdant rice paddies being worked by farmers in their conical hats, its bustling floating markets and untouched rural lifestyle. Putting my backpacker days long behind me, I stayed at the beautiful Victoria Hotel overlooking the river at Can Tho - a wonderful base from which to explore the region. The hotel offers a new and unforgettable breakfast cruise on a converted rice barge to see the floating market at Cai Rang. My guide and I watched the river come to life while enjoying a sumptuous buffet breakfast as the sun rose over the market, where industrious Vietnamese were trading goods from vessel to vessel.

Finally, I wanted some time to relax after my journey and perhaps surprisingly I found that Vietnam is a wonderful place to spend some time

on the beach. In the past Nha Trang was the traditional destination to enjoy the country's magical coastline; however, despite being home to the wonderful Ana Mandara Resort, it has now become rather spoilt and overrun. In contrast, only three hours' drive from Saigon, Phan Thiet is a peaceful fishing village with an excellent choice of new smaller resorts. Here I was able to enjoy the local seafood, the pristine white sand beach, the gentle sea and marvel that so much diversity can be found in just one country.

Travel File

Vietnam is now firmly on the travel map but it is very easy to skim over the surface and miss the small touches, be they a special restaurant or a morning's visit to the floating markets of the delta, that make it so special. Audley's Indochina specialists know Vietnam exceptionally well and can design your itinerary to include your interests and preferences. A two week private tour of Vietnam starts from £1,595 per person. For further details please call Tessa, Peter, Charlie or Natalie on 01869 276 200.