



PEACEFUL: The outer courtyard of Kim Lien Pagoda in Ha Noi's West Lake District.



EVERY INCH: Toy vendors sit on the sidewalk in the Old Quarter waiting for customers.

Hidden Ha Noi

Not every city is best seen through the lens of a Lonely Planet guidebook

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You might think that after living and working in a city for two years, one would know all the places to go.

The truth is, there are some cities that can only be learned and re-learned over time.

Ha Noi, the capital of Viet Nam, is one such city.

After being away for two months, I finally planned another trip to Ha Noi to spend some time with my partner and my dog. While residents of Asean countries can enter without a visa, the rest of us have to make do by applying for an entrance stamp at the nearest Vietnamese embassy or consulate and waiting the requisite five days.

Visa securely in hand and plane tickets confirmed, I flew into Ha Noi's unassuming Noi Bai International Airport ready to spend the weekend in what might be the most relaxing major city in Asia.

Recently, Ha Noi was chosen to host the Asia Pacific Economic Conference in November 2006, and as a result the airport facilities and highway into town have been upgraded. However, don't expect to save your last minute shopping for the meagre

stores at Noi Bai... there isn't even a cool bottle of water to be found.

Once immigration has been cleared and bags have been claimed, it's smooth sailing into the city centre. The ride from the airport takes approximately 45 minutes, and costs a maximum of 150,000 VND (US\$10). Of course, like many countries, it's best to hammer out the fare before setting off.

From the airport I went directly to my favourite part of the city and the place I called home for two years; the tiny lake that connects the small community of Truc Bach and Truc Bach Lake with the larger West Lake neighbourhood.

In the past this small community was home to artisans who sculpted in bronze, and some of their handiwork can still be seen today in the various *den* (temples) and *chua* (pagodas).

Presently, Truc Bach is a community of families and a few expats, with a healthy dose of soup vendors and tea stands thrown in for good measure. The neighbourhood is famous for its *pho cuon*, a delicacy made of thinly sliced beef wrapped in rice paper with fragrant herbs.

After digging into some local delicacies, the most pleasant way to spend the evening is to take a walk along the

path that follows the circumference of Truc Bach Lake, and take in the flowers, trees, calm water and young couples out in swan boats.

After a comfortable night snuggled in warm, thick blankets (Ha Noi can get surprisingly cold in the winter months, with temperatures as low as 10°C), the perfect place for breakfast or a late lunch is a tiny little café and restaurant called Puku tucked away in the Old Quarter.

The Old Quarter is for the most part a tourist and shopping central, with a wide variety of silk shops, tailors, T-shirt vendors and cafes.

What makes this particular café different, though, is its incredibly laid-back feel and fantastic food. Located at 60 Hang Trong Street, to get to the café proper, one must wander down a dank and narrow doorway until a flight of steps is revealed on the left. Up those steps, and comprising two floors, Puku is ground zero for Ha Noi's expats and for the city's hip young Vietnamese. With free WiFi and a delicious and varied breakfast and lunch menu, the soft couches and wooden tables are generally packed all day long. That's no reason to avoid it though, and after spending some time in the city, you find there's always someone friendly to chat with while sipping your coffee on the lush balconies.

While Ha Noi has most everything

SERENE: The Kim Lien Pagoda pond.



HOME AWAY FROM HOME: Puku Cafe's fantastic fruit juices and coffees have made it a hit with residents of Ha Noi.

a visitor could want, it does lack a little in the nightlife category. During certain months and in particular during major events and holidays, bars and clubs close at 12am, and you'd be hard-pressed to find a bowl of soup past 11pm.

That doesn't mean there's nothing to do, though.

Young Vietnamese get their kicks in the evening by driving their motorcycles around the city's numerous lakes, occasionally stopping on park benches to relax and watch the traffic. For those interested in something more engaging, there is one major movie theatre that regularly plays films in English (with Vietnamese subtitles) at Vincom City Towers, 191 Ba Trieu

Street. The Megastar Cineplex only opened in 2006, but it has fairly recent releases and deep, comfortable chairs. For the residents of Ha Noi, the new theatre is a big deal and the perfect place to spend a weekend evening or afternoon.

Between shopping in the Old Quarter and taking in the typical tourist sites (the Temple of Literature, the Water Puppet Show, Uncle Ho's Mausoleum), I always make sure to visit at least one *chua*, or pagoda.

My favourite is Chua Kim Lien, located in the north of the city and nestled on the banks of West Lake. A small, non-descript temple, Vietnamese places of worship are incredibly understated and what some might

call decrepit. In fact, these occasionally ramshackle buildings occupy an important place in the spiritual lives of the Vietnamese and are often dedicated to more than one deity. Most chuas are Buddhist shrines, with large lacquer statues of the Buddha commanding the place of honour on the altar. In addition, images of Kuan Yin (the female Buddha of compassion), Taoist saints and revered historical figures are also worshipped. Visitors won't find any elaborate gold leaf, mosaics or stupas on the grounds, but almost every temple or pagoda will have a small pond full of lotus flowers and green, verdant trees on the banks.

At my most recent stop at Chua Kim Lien, the only other souls around were two young Vietnamese artists sketching beside the pond and a single Buddhist nun arranging stacks of spirit money for sale.

The dark wood buildings, quiet atmosphere and almost total silence makes for a wonderfully relaxing afternoon.

To complete any visit to the city, one must make a stop at a local market, or *cho*. These markets supply most families with their daily quota of meat, veggies and fruit, and some specialise specifically in flowers or animals or housewares.

The Quang An night flower market in West Lake District is probably the city's most enthralling. Late at night when most people are asleep, flower growers from surrounding provinces ride into Ha Noi with their motorbikes jammed full of fresh blooms. Here, everything from orchids to kumquat trees to marigolds and poinsettias are for sale. Hanoians, especially young office workers, like nothing better than to start their day with a fresh bunch of flowers. Costing on average 10,000 VND (\$0.75) a bunch, it's a small price to pay for a stunning arrangement of tropical buds. During the day, young women on bikes wearing conical hats peddle throughout the city hawking their blooms.

In these quiet scenes of daily life, the real Ha Noi presents itself most accurately. Beyond the bustle of the Old Quarter and the constant flow of motorbike traffic lies a serene heartbeat, one that can easily lull any visitor into feeling right at home.

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