

insiderguide





northern charm

OLD MEETS NEW MEETS DELICIOUS
IN VIETNAM'S CAPITAL, HANOI

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY AMY VAN

In Hanoi, the new mingles effortlessly with the old.

This ancient northern Vietnamese city dates back to at least 3000BC and is well admired for its serene lakes, tree-lined boulevards, French colonial architecture, narrow shophouses and atmospheric old villas. These days, it has gained a name, too, for the spanking new developments that have sprouted up rapidly across the city. These include stylish upscale hotel properties that draw the jet set as the city continues to scale the popularity stakes as a travel destination.

Still, despite the relentless construction that is going on, Hanoi's timeless charm is very much preserved — in its sleepy side lanes, in its delectable pho and other such tasty street eats, and its charming shophouses. While its cash registers continue to ring as the Vietnamese economy opens up to the forces of capitalism and all the materialism that entails, the country's capital, thankfully, holds on to its culture and importantly, its rich, vibrant foodways.

WHET YOUR APPETITE

Cha Ca La Vong This small eatery is an institution and a must-visit for any traveller. Established in the 17th century, it is currently owned by the third generation of the Doan family. In this simple, no-frills setting, only one item is served — fried fish (cha ca) cooked over fiery coals. The restaurant is located on one of the shortest streets (aptly named after the famous dish) in Hanoi's Old Quarter.

Since 1871, the family has been using a specific type of fish called 'Lang' from the Red River about 130km north of Hanoi. The crispy fish slices are seasoned for several hours with salt, turmeric and other jealously guarded ingredients. The fish is pre-fried, transferred to a small pan of sizzling hot oil and placed atop a mini charcoal stove, which is then brought to your table.

Quickly dunk heaps of spring onions into the oil to prevent it from spluttering. When the fish turns golden brown, scoop them up and toss with vermicelli, peanuts, basil and a splash of pungent shrimp paste. Perfect! A shared meal for two costs about US\$12.14 Cha Ca Street. Tel: +(84) 4825-3929

Milan Saigon This swanky venue with two main dining sections, complete with show kitchens, is sprawled across the entire mezzanine level of the new Intercontinental Hanoi West Lake.

The first upscale Italian restaurant in the city,

Hanoi Lake



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
 Cha ca, fried fish cooked over fiery charcoal; Milan Saigon Restaurant; The cosy interior of Vine Wine Boutique Bar & Café; Slurp up a bowl of snail noodles in Quan An Ngon; Enjoy the sunset while sipping cocktails at the Sunset Bar; Deep-fried cod fish with dark soy sauce broth, a must-try at Club de L'Oriental



Milan's menu is created by Executive Chef Paolo Zambrano and showcases Italian classics, from pastas and risottos to wood-fired pizzas, and Italian grills such as hearty beef tenderloins, king prawns and whole lobsters. Over at the equally sleek Saigon, the menu features predominantly Vietnamese signatures such as bun cha or grilled pork with rice noodles and herbs; and nha trang fish soup, spicy fish soup with ladies finger, tomato and pineapple. A three-course meal here is priced from US\$40. 1A Nghi Tam, Tay Ho. Tel: +(84) 4270-8888

Club de L'Oriental After Hanoi's venerable Emperor Restaurant closed down, the owner launched Club de L'Oriental earlier this year at a small street near the Opera House. The three-storey building is fashioned like a charming villa. The main dining hall is on the second floor and boasts an open-kitchen; the third floor is a lounge where you get live Vietnamese music on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Former Emperor chefs rustle up traditional dishes from Northern and Central Vietnam, including deep-fried crabmeat spring rolls; banana blossom or green mango salad with shrimps and beef; deep-fried codfish with dark soy sauce broth; and soft shell crab with tamarind sauce. They also have an impressive wine collection — some 400 New and Old world labels, and a total of 14,000 bottles. Expect to pay about US\$30 per person. 22 Tong Dan Street, Hoan Kiem. Tel: +(84) 4826-8801

Vine Wine Boutique Bar & Café Occupying a three-story shophouse near the West Lake, Vine is helmed by Canadian Chef Donald Berger. The charming restaurant serves a combination of Vietnamese, Thai and European fare created by Berger and Nguyen Van Tu, one of Hanoi's famous Western-trained Vietnamese chefs.

Sample local dishes injected with a touch of luxury, such as pho topped with grilled and sliced US prime beef rib-eye, or tuck into classic coq au vin and Thai-style wood-fired bbq salmon or seabass steak. Those with big appetites can also order up the 20-odd different pastas and risottos available here. An

average three-course meal here costs about US\$30. 1A Xuan Dieu, Tay Ho. Tel: +(84) 4719-8000

Quan An Ngon Ngon (meaning: 'delicious') is set in a huge re-modelled villa. This vibrant venue has a large courtyard flanked by about 20 market-style 'open kitchens' rustling up dish after dish from the North, Central and South regions. Munch on crispy springrolls or freshly wrapped rice paper rolls, then slurp up a bowl of snail noodles bathed in clear, light stock. If you adore Vietnam's light, unadulterated flavours, this is the place to head to.

Sometimes reservations are possible, but usually, you'll have to wait for a few minutes when the place is crowded. Besides al fresco tables, you can enjoy your meal in the indoor dining halls. A meal comprising snacks and mains costs about US\$8 per person. 18 Phan Boi Chau, Hoan Kiem. Tel: +(84) 4942-8162

Sunset Bar Intercontinental Hanoi's Sunset Bar is located on an 'island' overlooking the fabled West Lake or Tay Ho, once the playground of Vietnam's royalty and the country's mandarins, who built summer homes on the shores. Take a pleasant stroll along a torch-lit bridge to reach the chill-out bar. During balmy evenings, this is the perfect place to sip cocktails and enjoy the sunset. On weekends, live music adds to the ambience. 1A Nghi Tam, Tay Ho. Tel: +(84) 4270-8888 ▶

AD



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
 Hawker grilling cuttlefish at the beer corner; Bia Hoi corner offers cheap local draft beers; Silk weaving; Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake; At Trieu Van Mao, you can find silk in a vast variety of colours

Bia Hoi corner Try some local draft beers at the bustling Bia Hoi 'beer corner' (intersection of Ta Hien and Luong Ngoc Quyen streets in the Old Quarter). Here, four corner shophouses have transformed their weathered dwelling place into 'mini bars' strewn with small plastic chairs. Grab a seat and pay US\$0.30 for a glass of chilled beer and US\$0.20 for peanuts. Random hawkers will come by to tout their local snacks such as slices of dried cuttlefish freshly grilled over hot charcoal. Dust and constant, deafening chatter aside, this is a great place to watch the world go by. Try Hai Loan at 41 Luong Ngoc Quyen

STAY THE NIGHT

Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake, the newest luxury hotel in Hanoi, is just 10 minutes' drive from the city centre. Built entirely over the serene waters of the historic West Lake, this urban oasis is a welcome respite from the frantic downtown area. Contemporary Vietnamese design melds perfectly with the unique 'resort-like' setting, where various 'pavilions' are linked by wide, Venetian-style promenades. Besides the luxurious, well-appointed rooms with large balconies facing the lake, cityscape or tropical gardens, the hotel has a bevy of dining options including Café du Lac, a French-style brasserie, and Milan Saigon. Intercontinental Hanoi also offers special 'Insiders Packages' organised by highly qualified tour guides, who will bring you to a host of non-touristy places.

These excellent personalised tours will allow you to explore architectural gems or sample a slice of authentic Vietnamese lifestyle. 1A Nghi Tam, Tay Ho District. Tel: +(84) 4270-8888; www.intercontinental.com/hanoi

Centrally located in Hanoi's French Quarter is the **Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel**. Only within a stone's throw from attractions such as the Opera House and Hoan Kiem Lake, it is also possible to walk to the Old Quarter from here. All guest rooms come with charming Vietnamese-style décor and afford lovely views. Dine on International fare at Chez Manon, which overlooks the Opera House or regional dishes at Ba Mien. 1 Le Thanh Tong Street, Hoan Kiem Street. Tel: +(84) 4933-0500

SHOPS & SIGHTS

The village of Van Phuc, once a famous commercial silk trading centre and about 25 minutes' drive from the city centre, is a great place to scour for silk purses, ties, scarves and other quality products.

Trieu Van Mao (Tel: +(84) 034 382 2805) is recommended for its 100 percent natural silk items. It has an old workshop with perfectly functional wooden machines that are at least three decades old. This company has been producing silk for five generations and displays its colourful silk products in the adjacent showroom.

Hanoi's Old Quarter is another fascinating spot where you can explore the maze of streets (try Hang Trong and Hang Gai Streets) lined with shops selling vibrant art pieces, lacquerware, lanterns, silk and souvenirs. Good bargaining skill is requisite. When your shopping bags are filled, head towards a corner shop on 46 Hang Gai to revive yourself with a glass of tropical fruits drizzled with evaporated milk and topped with crushed ice.

Finally, don't leave Hanoi without popping into one of the many cafes for a potent dose of Vietnamese coffee. **a**