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A roadside *cao lao* stall does brisk business

Charmed by the Cham Kingdom



One of the many well-preserved clan houses in Hoi An

The ruins of a 7th century Hindu kingdom, an ancient port city boasting centuries-old communal houses and narrow lanes, and an imperial capital city that has risen from the ashes of the Vietnam War – these are just some of the wonders of Central VIETNAM.

BY SREEREMA BANOO

On the fourteenth day of every lunar month, something magical happens in Hoi An. At around dusk, traffic at the heart of the ancient city comes to a standstill, lights are switched off and candles and lanterns are lit, bathing the city in an ethereal glow.

It's a time of celebration for its residents – families come out in droves, congregating along the Thu Bon River to cast candlelit paper lanterns onto the river while others offer prayers at the city's many temples. Couples stroll hand-in-hand along the riverfront or take languid boat rides on the river. Food vendors along the riverfront make a roaring trade as revellers order bowls of *cao lao*, crispy pancakes and spring rolls.

Over the years, the city's Full Moon Festival has begun to attract visitors from around the world, many timing their visit to this UNESCO World Heritage Site to coincide with the festivities. The celebrations are taken one notch higher during the annual Mid-Autumn Festival when lion dance troupes and a procession of small floats wind their way around the ancient city, making for quite a sight to behold.

But there is so much more to Hoi An than the events that take place during the Full Moon Festival. The city's name means 'peaceful meeting place', which describes its status as one of South East Asia's most important ancient trading ports. Historians believe that Hoi An, located in Quang Nam province in the south central coast of Vietnam, was founded more than 2,000 years ago as a primitive port for the Sa Huynh people. Evidence from archaeological excavations also point towards early trade with the Han dynasty in China. From the 7th century, the port was absorbed into the Champa Kingdom, where it became known as Lam Ap and later, Faifo.

From Hoi An, the Champas controlled the spice trade between the Spice Islands in Indonesia and China, India and the Persian Gulf states. Hoi An enjoyed a boom from the 16th to 18th century, was one of the most important ports in South East Asia – on par with Melaka – attracting Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Dutch and French merchants.

By the end of the 19th century however, the growth of other ports in the region such as Da Nang, overshadowed Hoi An and the town was relegated to a forgotten backwater. It is thought that this economic stagnation resulted in it being able to keep its appearance intact, and according to UNESCO, it is the only town in Vietnam to have done so.

Unlike the other Vietnamese cities, Hoi An is easily navigable on foot, with many of the important sights centred within the ancient town, which is located on the north bank of the Thu Bon River. Here, the fusion of cultures as a result of its standing as a thriving port can be seen in the architectural styles of the buildings along the narrow roads and lanes. They include family cult houses (dedicated to the worship of ancestors), community houses and pagodas. Some of the larger pagodas also served as meeting halls and



Top: A statue of Ganesha – one of the many fine pieces at the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Da Nang
Bottom: The Trang Tien Bridge and its changing lights make for a great photo stop.





The sights of Central Vietnam (from left): Centuries-old shop houses in Hoi An; a quiet corner in the Forbidden Purple City; and the Thien Mu Pagoda (both in Hue).

these are located along Tran Phu, the main street of the ancient town.

One of the most popular attractions in Hoi An is the Japanese Covered Bridge on the west end of Tran Phu. Built in the early 1600s by the Japanese community, the bridge is today the symbol of the city.

Ruins of a Cham Kingdom

Just 68km southwest of Hoi An lies an enigmatic and mysterious set of ruins called My Son. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it was the religious centre of the Cham Empire at the height of its power from the 7th to the 12th century. Followers of Hinduism, the Cham built temples and monuments to honour Hindu divinities, in particular Lord Shiva. Like Angkor Wat in Cambodia, My Son's tower temples have a variety

of architectural designs symbolising the greatness of Mount Meru, the mythical sacred mountain home of Hindu gods. They are constructed in fired brick with stone pillars and decorated with sandstone bas-reliefs depicting scenes from Hindu mythology.

My Son was abandoned by the 15th century when the Cham people moved south, but unfortunately it wasn't the passage of time or nature that has resulted in the ruin of many of the structures. During World War II and especially during the Vietnam War, many tower temples were damaged. While conservation work has been carried out, visitors should manage their expectations. Although some of the ancient towers are still intact and the carvings visible, these are nowhere as impressive as the temples of Angkor. Its pastoral setting though, with rolling green hills and streams in and around the secluded valley, gives it a somewhat tranquil vibe, and for anyone with an interest in history or architecture, it's well worth the visit. To take advantage of the calm, do make an early start and get there before the tourist buses.

Should you be suitably intrigued by the Chams, then make your way to the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Da Nang. Founded in 1915, the museum contains many sculptures collected from My Son as well as other provinces. Most of the sites where the sculptures originate from no longer exist, either destroyed by time or wars – making the museum a significant repository of Cham art.

City on the Perfume River

About 140km north of Hoi An lies the city of Hue which served as the imperial capital of Vietnam's last monarchy, the Nguyen Dynasty from 1802 to 1945. Given its imperial stature, this city located on the banks of the Huong River – or the Perfume River – has many royal monuments.

The most famous and impressive of these is the Forbidden Purple City (purple is a colour that is synonymous with Hue), the home of the Nguyen Emperors until 1945. From the early 1800s until Emperor Bao Dai's abdication in 1945, the city enclosed by the high-walled Citadel was the seat of the Vietnamese government. After the emperor's abdication, this role was assumed by





Ho Chi Minh City (then Saigon, from 1945-1975) and subsequently Hanoi.

The Citadel was badly damaged during fighting between the French and the Viet Minh in 1947, and again in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, when it was shelled by the Viet Cong and then bombed by the Americans. Many of the imperial buildings within the palace grounds were also destroyed during the Tet Offensive, and though some of these buildings have been restored, or are in the process of restoration, some are mere shadows of their previous selves with only structural beams or foundations intact.

Those buildings that have been restored include a series of palaces, temples, pavilions, bridges and together with a lake bursting with blooming lotuses, they do much to offer a glimpse of the city's royal past.

Some 4km away from the city centre set on a bluff overlooking the river lies the seven-storey Thien Mu Pagoda. Thien Mu means 'elderly celestial woman', and this refers to a legend about the founding of the pagoda. While the many trees around the pagoda compound make it shady enough for a visit anytime during the day, the best

time to visit is at sunset, when the setting sun bathes the river pewter-gold.

If you're tired of the historic sights and monuments, head over the promenade along the Perfume River. The area around the Trang Tien Bridge, which connects the citadel area with the new town across the river, is itself a major attraction as it is lit with lights that change colour every few seconds – making this just the spot to cap off a brilliant visit to this elegant city.



Clockwise from top left:
Hoi An takes on an ethereal glow during each month's Full Moon Festival; one of the few sculptures left intact at My Son; the Forbidden Purple City was the home of the Nguyen Emperors until 1945; lanterns galore in Hoi An; one of the many pavilions within the grounds of the Purple City.

Bottom: Banh khoai, a pancake filled with bean sprouts, shrimp and meat is a must-have in Hue (left); A scene from the streets of Hoi An.

