Central Vietnam

Home to historical sites, fantastic food and the country’s most iconic beach, central Vietnam deserves to rate as a top priority for travellers. Tourists wanting to avoid lengthy bus journeys will find Danang’s airport the perfect gateway to a fascinating set of the country’s most famous destinations, including three must-see Unesco World Heritage sites – history-seeped Imperial Hué, architecturally impressive Hoi An and the sacred ruins of ancient My Son.

The north of the region continues to attract its share of former servicemen revisiting the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), the old border between North and South Vietnam, which saw some of the fiercest fighting of the American War. Other GIs have returned permanently to join the ex-pat community in bustling Danang. It’s not just veterans that find these locales fascinating – the war’s impact on popular culture also attracts legions of younger tourists.

There are plenty of relatively undiscovered spots deserving of exploration, including the beautiful cool heights of Bach Ma National Park and Ba Na Hill Station, and, surprisingly, large tracts of tele-famous China Beach. Other spots, such as the Marble Mountains and Hai Van Pass, are choked with hawkers but still make fascinating stops.

The range of accommodation on offer is extraordinary – from great-value budget places to some of the most luxurious resorts in the country. Hoi An is a shopper’s paradise and, along with Hué, a great location for foodies.

Do the maths: it all adds up to make this region a must on any trip through Vietnam.

HIGHLIGHTS
- Eat your way around the local specialities in the beautiful buildings and historic streets of Hoi An (p239)
- Get imperious, making yourself at home in the Forbidden Purple City in Hué (p209)
- Chill out above the clouds in beautiful Ba Na Hill Station (p228)
- Savour the atmosphere of the holy places of the Cham people at My Son (p262)
- Cruise on the back of a bike along the 30km white sand stretch of China Beach (p237)

HISTORY

History hangs heavily over the central Vietnam region, and the Vietnamese are only one element of the successive stories that have unfolded here. This region was the heartland of the ancient kingdom of Champa (see the boxed text, p264), and the Chams left their mark in the shape of the many towers dotting the landscape, the most renowned of which are at My Son.

As the Vietnamese pushed southwards, pacifying the Chams, the first Europeans set foot in Vietnam: Portuguese traders, who arrived in Danang in the 16th century. The French would come to dominate Vietnam, but not before the balance of power shifted decisively to central Vietnam under the last royal dynasty, the Nguyens, who ruled from 1802 to 1945. Successive emperors established a lavish imperial court at Hué, which became the centre of political intrigue, intellectual excellence and spiritual guidance in Vietnam. The French broke the will of later emperors and the balance of power shifted back to Hanoi by the time of independence.

History was not to ignore this once-proud region, but this time it was a tale of tragedy. As Vietnam found itself engulfed in the American War, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting. The North Vietnamese sought to infiltrate the south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while American forces and their South Vietnamese allies tried their best to disrupt supplies.
Thousands of lives were lost in bloody battles for strategic hills and valleys, and names like Khe Sanh and Hamburger Hill were forever etched into the consciousness of the West.

**Getting There & Away**

Both Huế and Danang have airports, the latter linked to many major cities. The major north–south rail route cuts straight through the region, as does Hwy 1A.

**DEMILITARISED ZONE (DMZ)**

The Vietnam War (as the West knows it) shaped the culture of a whole generation throughout much of the world. The incredible output of films, TV shows and music relating to the war is testimony to that. While it may seem a little ghoulish, it’s understandable that many tourists want to visit the names engraved in their consciousness – and not just for the war is testimony to that. While the Japanese occupation forces to the south that the North would surrender to the British while those to the north would surrender to the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Chinese army led by Chiang Kai-shek. This was despite the Viet Minh being in control of the country by September that year – Vietnam’s first real taste of independence since 1887.

**History**

The idea of partitioning Vietnam had its origins in a series of agreements concluded between the USA, UK and the USSR at the Potsdam Conference, held in Berlin in July 1945. For logistical and political reasons, the Allies decided that the Japanese occupation forces to the south of the 16th Parallel would surrender to the British while those to the north would surrender to the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Chinese army led by Chiang Kai-shek. This was despite the Viet Minh being in control of the country by September that year – Vietnam’s first real taste of independence since 1887.

In April 1954 at Geneva, Ho Chi Minh’s government and the French agreed to an armistice; among the provisions was the creation of a demilitarised zone at the Ben Hai River. The agreement stated explicitly that the division of Vietnam into two zones was merely temporary and that the demarcation line did not constitute a political boundary. But when nationwide general elections planned for July 1956 were cancelled by the South who predicted a Viet Minh win, Vietnam found itself divided into two states with the Ben Hai River, which is almost exactly at the 17th Parallel, as their de facto border.

During the American War, the area just south of the DMZ was the scene of some of the bloodiest battles of the conflict. Quang Tri, the north side, Khe Sanh, Lang-Vay and Hamburger Hill became household names in the USA as, year after year, TV pictures and casualty figures provided Americans with their evening dose of war.

Since 1975, 5000 people have been injured or killed in and around the DMZ by mines and ordnance left over from the war. Despite the risk, impoverished peasants still dig for chunks of leftover metal to sell as scrap, or killed in and around the DMZ by mines and ordnance left over from the war. Despite the risk, impoverished peasants still dig for chunks of leftover metal to sell as scrap, or for a day’s tour.

**Orientation**

The old DMZ extends from the coast westward to the Lao border; Hwy 9 runs basically parallel to the DMZ, about 10km south, and passes beside several US bases.

The road leading southeast from the Dakrong Bridge on Hwy 9 goes to Aluoi and the Ashau Valley (site of the infamous Hamburger Hill).

**Information**

For an in-depth tour of the DMZ, it is best to link up with a good guide, both to fully appreciate the history and, critically, to physically find some of the sites. Many are unmarked, and it’s easy to get lost in the labyrinth of dirt tracks.

Day tours are most readily available in Huế and Dong Ha. Bookings can be made at almost any hotel or café in either town. There are only a few agencies running the tours, so no matter where you sign up you’ll probably wind up as part of a group. Expect to pay around US$8 to US$15 for a day-long outing. Most of the guides have English-speaking guides, but some speak French. The main complaint about these bus tours is that they are extremely long and, as they cover quite a distance, there’s more time spent driving than sightseeing. A car and guide from Huế may set you back around US$65.

In Dong Ha you can’t move for motorcyclists offering tours on the back of their bikes. Many of the older guys speak excellent English as they once worked for the American military or fought alongside them. Unfortunately the one-time defenders of capitalism also demand extortionate fees – US$15 is fair for a day’s tour.

**Military Sites off Highway 1A**

**VINH MOC TUNNELS**

The incredible tunnels of Vinh Moc (admission 15,000d, 7am–4.30pm) are a monument to the perseverance of the North Vietnamese. The 2.8km of tunnels, all of which can be visited, are the real thing and unadulterated for viewing by tourists, unlike the tunnels at Cu Chi (p378). Vinh Moc’s underground passageways...
are larger and taller than those at Cu Chi, which makes for an easier and slightly less claustrophobic visit. There are lights installed inside the tunnels, but you may also want to bring a torch (flashlight). There’s an interesting museum on site, housing photos and relics of tunnel life. Outside, American bomb casings are dotted around everywhere, as are the craters that they created.

A visit to the tunnels can be combined with bathing at the beaches that extend for many kilometres to the north and south.

The turn-off to Vinh Moc from Hwy 1A is 6.5km north of the Ben Hai River in the village of Ho Xa. Follow this road east for 13km.

Cua Tung Beach
This long, secluded stretch of sand, where Vietnam’s last emperor, Bao Dai, used to hol-iday, is just north of the mouth of the Ben Hai.

There are beaches on the southern side of the Ben Hai River as well. Every bit of land in the area not levelled for planting is pockmarked with big bomb craters.

There are no buses to Cua Tung Beach, which can be reached by turning east off Hwy 1A at a point 1.2km north of the Ben Hai River. Cua Tung Beach is about 7km south of Vinh Moc via the dirt road that runs along the coast.

Doc Mieu Base
Doc Mieu Base, next to Hwy 1A on a low slope 8km south of the Ben Hai River, was once part of an elaborate electronic system (McNamara’s Wall, named after the US Secretary of Defense between 1961 and 1968) intended to prevent infiltration across the DMZ. Today it is a lunar landscape of bunkers, craters, shrapnel and live mortar rounds. Bits of cloth and decaying military boots are strewn about on the red earth. This devastation was created not only by the bombs, but also by scrap-metal hunters, who found excavations at this site particularly rewarding.

Ben Hai River
Twenty-two kilometres north of Dong Ha, Hwy 1A crosses the Ben Hai River, once the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam. Check out the old wartime bridge – until 1967, when it was bombed by the Americans, the northern half of the bridge that stood on this site was painted red, while the southern half was yellow. Following the signing of the Paris cease-fire agreements in 1973, the present bridge and the two flag towers were built.

Truong Son National Cemetery
Truong Son National Cemetery is a sobering memorial to the tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers who were killed in the Truong Son Mountain Range along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Row after row of white tombstones stretch across the hillsides. The cemetery is maintained by disabled war veterans.

The soldiers are buried in five zones according to the part of Vietnam they came from, and each zone is further subdivided into provinces. The gravestones of five colonels and seven decorated heroes, including one woman, are in a separate area. Each headstone bears the inscription ‘Liet Si’, which means martyr. The remains of soldiers interred here were originally buried near the spot where they were killed and were brought here after reunification. Many graves are empty, simply bearing the names of a small number of Vietnam’s 300,000 MIAs.

The site where the cemetery now stands was used as a base by the May 1959 Army Corps from 1972 to 1975. Named after the date on which they were founded, they had the mission of constructing and maintaining a supply line to the South – the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On the hilltop above the sculpture garden is a three-sided stele with inscriptions paying tribute to this corps and outlining their history.

The road to Truong Son National Cemetery intersects Hwy 1A 13km north of Dong Ha and 9km south of the Ben Hai River; the distance from the highway to the cemetery is 17km.

A rocky path that is passable by motorbike links Cam Lo (on Hwy 9) with Truong Son National Cemetery (18km). This track passes rubber plantations and also the homes of Bru (Van Kieu) people, who cultivate, among many other crops, black pepper.

CON THIEN FIREBASE
In September 1967 North Vietnamese forces, backed by long-range artillery and rockets, crossed the DMZ and besieged the US Marine Corps base of Con Thien, which was established as part of McNamara’s Wall in an attempt to stop infiltrations across the DMZ.

The USA responded with 4000 bombing sorties (including 800 by B-52s), during which more than 40,000 tonnes of bombs were dropped on the North Vietnamese forces around Con Thien, transforming the gently sloping brush-covered hills into a smoking moonscape of craters and ash. The siege was lifted, but the battle had accomplished its real purpose: to divert US attention from South Vietnam’s cities in preparation for the Tet Offensive. The area around the base is still contaminated with dangerous, even for scrap-metal hunters, to approach.

Con Thien Firebase is 10km west of Hwy 1A and 7km south of Truong Son National Cemetery along the road that links the highway with the cemetery. Concrete bunkers mark the spot a few hundred metres to the south of the road where the base once stood.

Military Sites on Highway 9
The legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail – the main artery of supplies for the North’s war effort – was not one path but many, leading through the jungles of the country’s mountainous western spine. In an effort to cut the line near the border, the Americans established a series of bases along Hwy 9, including (from west to east) Lang Vay, Khe Sanh, Ca Lu (now called Dakrong Town), The Rockpile, Camp Carroll, Cam Lo, Dong Ha, Gio Linh and Cua Viet. Ultimately their efforts were unsuccessful.

Lang Vay Special Forces Camp
In February 1968 Lang Vay Special Forces Camp was attacked and overrun by North Vietnamese infantry backed by nine tanks. Ten of the 24 Americans at the base were killed, along with 316 South Vietnamese, Bru and Montagnard (term meaning highlanders, used to refer to the ethnic minorities) defenders. All that’s left of the dog bone–shaped camp are the overgrown remains of numerous concrete bunkers, and a rusty tank memorial.

The base is on a ridge southwest of Hwy 9, between Khe Sanh bus station (9.2km) and Lao Bao (7.3km).

Huong Ha (Khe Sanh Town)
This town has now been officially renamed Huong Ha, but the Western world remembers it as Khe Sanh. Set amid beautiful hills, valleys and for more than 300m, it is a verdant district capital. The town is known for its coffee plantations, which were originally cultivated by the French.
Central Vietnam

Many of the inhabitants are of the Bru tribe who moved here from the surrounding hills. You’ll notice their different clothing, with women wearing sarong-like skirts, and woven baskets taking the place of plastic bags.

About the only reason for staying here is if you’re planning to hit the road to Laos the next morning. The Huong Hoa (Khe Sanh) Guesthouse (053-880 139; 64 Khe Sanh; r 120,000d, $2) offers private bathrooms and hot water.

The bus station is on Hwy 9, about 600m towards the Lao frontier from the triangular intersection where the road to Khe Sanh Combat Base branches off. Buses to Dong Ha (15,000d, 1 1/2 hours) and Lao Bao (10,000d, one hour) depart regularly. Change at Dong Ha for all other destinations.

Khe Sanh Combat Base

The site of the most famous siege – and one of the most controversial battles – of the American War, Khe Sanh Combat Base (admission 30,000d, 7am-4:30pm) sits silently on a barren plateau, surrounded by vegetation-covered hills that are often obscured by mist and fog. It is hard to imagine as you stand in this peaceful, verdant land that in early 1968 the bloodiest battle of the war took place here. About 300 Americans (the official figure of 205 was arrived at by statistical sleight of hand), 10,000 North Vietnamese troops and uncounted civilian bystanders died amid the din of machine guns and the fiery explosions of 100kg bombs, white-phosphorus shells, napalm, mortars and artillery rounds of all sorts.

The site includes the recent addition of a small memorial museum. A couple of bunkers have been recreated and some photos and other memorabilia are on show. Behind the main site, the outline of the airfield remains distinct – to this day nothing will grow on it. Some of the comments in the visitors’ book, especially those written by visiting war veterans, can make for emotional reading.

A MIA team still visits the area regularly to search for the bodies of Americans who, can make for emotional reading, especially those written by visiting war veterans. In late 1967 American intelligence detected the movement into the hills around Khe Sanh of tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars, armed with mortars, rockets and artillery. General Westmoreland became convinced that the North Vietnamese were planning another Dien Bien Phu (the decisive battle in the Franco-Viet Minh War in 1954). This analogy was foolhardy, given American firepower and the proximity of Khe Sanh to supply lines and other US bases. President Johnson himself became obsessed by the spectre of ‘Din Bin Foo’, as he famously referred to it. To follow the course of the battle, he had a sand-table model of the Khe Sanh plateau constructed in the White House situation room and took the unprecedented step of requiring a written guarantee from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Khe Sanh could be held.

Westmoreland, determined to avoid another Dien Bien Phu at all costs, assembled an armada of 5000 planes and helicopters and increased the number of troops at Khe Sanh to 6000. He even ordered his staff to study the feasibility of using tactical nuclear weapons.

The 75-day siege of Khe Sanh began on 21 January 1968 with a small-scale assault on the base perimeter. As the marines and the South Vietnamese Rangers braced for a full-scale ground attack, Khe Sanh became the focus of global media attention. It was the cover story for both Newsweek and Life magazines, and appeared on the front pages of countless newspapers around the world.

During the next two months the base was subject to continuous ground attacks and artillery fire. US aircraft dropped 100,000 tonnes of explosives on the immediate vicinity of Khe Sanh Combat Base. The expected attempt to overrun the base never came and, on 7 April 1968 after heavy fighting, US troops reopened Hwy 9 and linked up with the marines to end the siege.

It now seems clear that the siege was merely an enormous diversion intended to draw US forces and the attention of their commanders away from the South Vietnamese population centres in preparation for the Tet Offensive, which began a week after the siege started. However, at the time, Westmoreland considered the entire Tet Offensive to be a ‘diversionary effort’ to distract attention from Khe Sanh.

After Westmoreland’s tour of duty in Vietnam ended in July 1968, US forces in the area were redeployed. Policy had been reassessed and holding Khe Sanh, for which so many men had died, was deemed unnecessary. After everything at Khe Sanh was buried, trucked out or blown up (nothing recognisable that could be used in a North Vietnamese propaganda film was to remain), US forces upped and left Khe Sanh Combat Base under a curtain of secrecy. The American command had finally realised what a marine officer had expressed long before: ‘When you’re at Khe Sanh, you’re not really anywhere. You could lose it and you really haven’t lost a damn thing.’

In 1972 the South Vietnamese commander of the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Ton That Dinh, surrendered and joined the North Vietnamese Army.

These days there is not that much to see at Camp Carroll, except for a Vietnamese memorial marker, a few overgrown trenches and the remains of their timber roofs. Bits of military hardware and rusty shell casings can still be found. The concrete bunkers were destroyed by local people seeking to extract the steel reinforcing rods to sell as scrap. Concrete chunks from the bunkers were hauled off for use in construction.

The Rockpile

Back on Hwy 9, this 230m-high pile of rocks was once part of a US Marine Corps lookout on top and a base for American long-range artillery nearby.

Today there isn’t much left of The Rockpile and you will probably need a guide to point it out to you. It’s 26km west of Dong Ha on Hwy 9.

Camp Carroll

Established in 1966, Camp Carroll was named after a Marine Corps captain who was killed while trying to seize a nearby ridge. The garnetian 175m cannons at Camp Carroll were used to shell targets as far away as Khe Sanh.

The area around Camp Carroll now belongs to State Pepper Enterprises. On the road in, you’ll see pepper plants trained so that they climb up the trunks of jackfruit trees. There are also rubber plantations nearby.

The turn-off to Camp Carroll is 10km west of Cam Lo and 23km northeast of Dakrong Bridge. The base is 3km from Hwy 9.

Dong Ha

Like Dong Hoi to the north, Dong Ha awoke in 1954 to find that it had moved from the centre of the country to the edge of a heavily
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militarised border. There’s still an element of the Wild West to Dong Ha. It’s not a particularly friendly or attractive place, and the scramble for tourist dollars borders on aggressive.

The capital of the reconstituted Quang Tri province, Dong Ha is at the busy intersection of Hwys 1A and 9. Dong Ha served as a US Marine Corps command and logistics centre from 1968 to 1969. In the spring of 1968 a division of North Vietnamese troops crossed the DMZ and attacked the city. Later it was the site of a South Vietnamese army base.

Today there is no conceivably reason to visit, save as a base to explore the DMZ or a stop on the way to the Lao border. Hwy 1A traffic thunders through town, dust blowing and horns blaring, and almost all the hotels are close by. The public loudspeakers start their broadcasting at 5am.

Orientation

Hwy 1A is called Đ Le Duan as it passes through Dong Ha. Hwy 9, with signs reading ‘Lao Bao’, intersects Hwy 1A next to the bus station.

Information

Dich Vu Internet (857 177; 177 Đ Le Duan) Incombank (189 Đ Le Duan) Has an ATM in front of Sepon Tavel.

Quang Tri Tourism (852 927; dmzqt@h同伴.vn; 66 Đ Le Duan) Situated at the Mekong Hotel, this state office runs DMZ tours and arrange car rentals.

Sepon Travel (855 289; www.sepon.com.vn; 189 Đ Le Duan) Handles bookings for DMZ bus tours, buses to Savannakhet (Laos) and Vietnamese Airlines. Can also arrange cars and drivers for private DMZ tours.

Sleeping

Hotel Maiyen (551 750; 24 Đ Nguyen Trai; r 120,000-150,000d; ) Situated on a leafy street just off the highway near the bus station, this is a friendly place with scrupulously clean rooms.

Melody Hotel (554 664; www.melodyhotel.net; 62 Đ Le Duan; s/d/tr 120,000/150,000/180,000d; ) Although on the noisy highway, the sky-blue Melody Hotel has tidy rooms with all the usual facilities, as well as motorbikes for rent (80,000d per day).

Khach San Duong 9 Xanh (Highway Hotel; 550 999; 4 Đ Nguyen Trai; r 125,000d; ) On the same quiet strip as Maiyen, the rooms are a little run down but they all have a TV, fridges and hot water.

To get to the Dong Ha train station from the bus station, head 1km southeast on Hwy 1A to a big guesthouse called Nha Khach 261. Turn right here and the back of the train station is about 150m over the tracks.

LAO BAO (LAOS BORDER)

153 / pop 33,000

Lao Bao, on the Sepon River (Song Xe Pon), which divides Vietnam–Laos border, is an important crossing for trade and tourism between the two countries. Towering above Lao Bao on the Laos side of the border is Co Roc Mountain, once a North Vietnamese artillery stronghold.

There is a huge border market on the Vietnamese side, where goods smuggled from Thailand are readily available. Merchants accept either Vietnamese dong or Lao kip. Don’t change US dollars at the border unless you have to: the rate can be about 50% lower than the banks.

There’s no reason to linger in Lao Bao, but if you miss the border opening hours (see p210) and need a place to stay, Bao Son Hotel (877 848; fax 877 660; rUS$12, ) is a small business hotel and good value for the money. There is the inevitable row of com pho (rice noodle soup) places in the centre of town.

Lao Bao town is 18km west of Khe Sanh, 87km from Dong Ha, 152km from Hué, 45km east of Sepon (Laos) and 255km east of Savannakhet (Laos).

QUANG TRI

153 / pop 15,400

Quang Tri was once an important citadel city. In the spring of 1972 four divisions of North Vietnamese regulars, backed by tanks, artillery and rockets, poured across the DMZ into Quang Tri province in what became known as the Easter Offensive. They laid siege to Quang Tri town, shelling it heavily before capturing it along with the rest of the province.

During the next four months the city was almost completely obliterated by South Vietnamese artillery and carpet bombing by US fighter-bombers and B-52s. The South Vietnamese army suffered 5000 casualties in the rubble-to-rubble fighting to retake the city.

Today there is little to see except a few remaining of the most ramparts and gates of the Citadel, which once served as a South Vietnamese army headquarters. The remnants are 1.6km north from Hwy 1A. Along Hwy 1A, on the Hué side of Quang Tri, is the skeleton of a church chillingly scarred with bullet holes and mortar shells.

The bus station (Đ Tran Hung Dao) is about 1km from Hwy 1A, but buses can just as easily be flagged down on the side of the road.

HUÉ

154 / pop 311,700

If art and architecture matter more to you than beaches and beer, Hué will be high on your Vietnam must-visit list. The capital of the Nguyen emperors, Hué is packed with temples, palaces and pagodas – or at least the remains of those that successive armies didn’t manage to completely destroy. Foodies won’t want to miss the fussy degustation-style Imperial cuisine for which this city is rightly famous.

Throughout the banks of the enigmatically named Perfume River, the peculiar light of this historic place imbues photographs with a hazy, purple tinge. It would all be quite idyllic if it weren’t for the constant dogging most tourists face as soon as they step off the bus. The bouts in Hué are more incessant than most.

While the offshoots of mass tourism may be annoying, it should be remembered that Hué’s cultural sites were destined for oblivion without it. After 1975 they were left to decay – Imperialist reminders of the feudal Nguyen dynasty. In 1990 that the local People’s Committee recognised the potential of the place and declared these sites ‘national treasures’. In 1993 Unesco designated the complex of monuments in Hué a World Heritage site, and restoration and preservation work continues.

The Festival of Hué is celebrated biennially in even-numbered years, with local and international cultural performers at locations throughout the city. Hotel accommodation is at a premium at this time, so book ahead if you can.

History

The citadel city of Phu Xuan was built in 1687, 5km northeast of present-day Hué. In 1744 Phu Xuan became the capital of the southern part of Vietnam, which was under the rule of the Nguyen lords. The Tay Son Rebels occupied the city from 1786 until 1802, when it fell to Nguyen Anh. He crowned himself Emperor Gia Long, thus founding the Nguyen dynasty, which ruled the country – at least in name – until 1945.
CENTRAL VIETNAM • Hué

BORDER CROSSING: LÃO BAO/DANSAVANH

The Lao Bao border (7am–6pm) is the most popular and least problematic crossing between Laos and Vietnam. You can get a 30-day Lao visa (US$30) on arrival in Dansavanh, but Vietnamese visas still need to be arranged in advance; drop in on the Vietnamese consulate in Savannakhet.

Dong Ha is the junction town for Lao Bao, with regular bus services (see p208). Sepon Travel in Dong Ha (see p208) has buses to Savannakhet (US$12, 7½ hours), continuing to Vientiane (13 hours); they leave Dong Ha at 8am every second day and return the next day. These buses also pass through Huế (US$14 to US$15, add 1½ hours), and can be booked from the Mandarin and Sinh Café (see opposite). If you’re travelling across the border by tourist bus, expect a wait while documents are checked. When booking a tourist bus, make sure to confirm (preferably in writing) that the same bus carries on through the border. We’ve heard plenty of stories of tourists being bundled off nice buses on the Vietnam side and on to overcrowded local buses once they reach Laos.

The border post used to be 2km from Lao Bao town, but the town has expanded so fast it runs almost up to the border. From the bus station the local price for a xe om (motorbike taxi) to the border is 5000d (foreigners pay about 10,000d), or walk it in about 20 minutes. Between the Vietnam and Laos border posts is a short walk of a few hundred metres.

Once in Laos there is only one public bus a day direct to Savannakhet, which leaves when full. Sawngthaew (pick-up trucks) leave fairly regularly to Sepon, from where you can get a bus or further sawngthaew to Savannakhet.

Coming the other way, Route 9 from Savannakhet to the border is now one of the best roads in Laos. From Savannakhet, buses (US$3, 255km, five hours) leave at 7am and noon for the border. Alternatively, take a sawngthaew to Sepon (US$3, 210km, four hours) and another from there to the border (US$1.20, 45km, one hour).

Travellers coming from Laos should be aware that no public buses go directly to Huế, despite what drivers may tell you! Some through-buses arrive at the border after it’s closed, making for an uncomfortable overnight wait – we’ve had reports from travellers who have been groped and manhandled while trying to catch some sleep on buses packed with coal and rice.

In 1885, when the advisers of 13-year-old Emperor Ham Nghi objected to French activities in Tonkin, French forces encircled the city. Unwisely, the outnumbered Vietnamese forces launched an attack; the French responded mercilessly. According to a contemporary French account, the French forces took three days to burn the imperial library. The French then proceeded according to lists of names meticulously prepared months before. During the 3½ weeks Huế remained under Northern control, over 2500 people – including wealthy merchants, government workers, monks, priests and intellectuals – were summarily shot, clubbed to death or buried alive. Shallow mass graves were discovered at various spots around the city over the following few years.

When the South Vietnamese army units proved unable to dislodge the occupying North Vietnamese and VC forces, General Westmoreland ordered US troops to recapture the city. Over the next few weeks, while American command was waning, its energies on Khe Sanh, North Vietnamese and VC troops skirted the American stronghold and walked right into Huế.

Imminently on taking the city, political cadres implemented detailed plans to remove Huế’s ‘uncooperative’ elements. Thousands of people were rounded up in extensive house-to-house searches, conducted according to lists of names meticulously prepared months before. During the 3½ weeks Huế remained under Northern control, over 2500 people – including wealthy merchants, government workers, monks, priests and intellectuals – were summarily shot, clubbed to death or buried alive. Shallow mass graves were discovered at various spots around the city over the following few years.

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IMMEDIATE ENCLOSURE

Housing the emperor’s residence and the main buildings of state, the Imperial Enclosure (admission...
Central Vietnam  ••  Huế

Royal Treasury. To the rear of this is a park stroll. Huế and much more enjoyable as a leisurely easy reached on foot from anywhere in tours include a only brief stop here – it's easily spend the better part of a day exploring.

This is a fascinating site, which you could sat on his elevated throne and his mandarins money) here when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated to a throne, as was the bridge across the lotus pond. Other mere mortals had to use the gates to either side and the paths around the pond.

On top of the gate is a辍 Phung (Belvedere of the Five Phoenixes), where the emperor appeared on important occasions, most notably for the promulgation of the lunar calendar. On 30 August 1945 the Nguyen dynasty ended here when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated to a delegation sent by Ho Chi Minh’s Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Thai Hoa Palace
Built in 1803, Thai Hoa Palace (Palace of Supreme Harmony) is a spacious hall with an ornate timber roof supported by 80 carved and lacquered columns. It was used for the emperor’s official receptions and other important court ceremonies, such as anniversaries and coronations. During state occasions the emperor sat on his elevated throne and his mandarins paid homage. Nine stelae divide the two-level courtyard into separate areas for officials in each of the nine ranks of the mandarinate; administrative mandarins stood to one side while the military mandarins stood to the other.

Halls of the Mandarins
The buildings in which the mandarins prepared for court ceremonies were restored in 1977. The structures are located directly behind Thai Hoa Palace on either side of a courtyard, where there are two gargantuan bronze vac dong (cauldrons) dating from the 17th century. The hall to the left has been set up for cheesy tourist photos; you can pose in Imperial costume on the throne for 20,000d, while two flunkies will pose with you for 40,000d. The opposite hall houses a collection of gowns and porcelains from the Nguyen era.

Behind the courtyard are the ruins of the Can Chanh Palace, a large hall for receptions.

Forbidden Purple City
Behind the palace, in the very centre of the Imperial Enclosure, the Forbidden Purple City (Tu Can Thanh) is a citadel-within-a-citadel-within-a-citadel. Reserved solely for the personal use of the emperor, the only servants allowed into this compound were eunuchs who would pose no threat to the royal concubines. It was almost entirely destroyed in the wars, and a large part is now draped in green foliage. Take care as you wander around the ruins as there are some gaping holes.

To the right the Royal Theatre (Duyet Thi Duong; tickets 20,000d), begun in 1826 and later home to the National Conservatory of Music, has been rebuilt on the former foundations. Cultural performances are held here daily at 9am, 10am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm. Behind this, the two-storey Emperor’s Reading Room (Thai Binh Lau), decorated with interesting roof mosaics, was the only part of the Forbidden Purple City to have escaped damage during the French reoccupation of Huế in 1947.

To Mieu Temple Complex
Taking up the south corner of the Imperial Enclosure, this walled complex dedicated to the Nguyen emperors has been beautifully restored.

After entering through the ornate temple gate, you must then pass through the three-tiered Hien Lam Pavilion. On the other side of this stand Nine Dynastic Urns. These dình (urns) were cast between 1835 and 1836, each dedicated to a different Nguyen sovereign. Engraved into the sides are heavenly bodies and landscapes. About 2m in height and weighing 1900kg to 2600kg each, the urns symbolise the power and stability of the Nguyen throne. The central urn, which is the largest and most ornate, is dedicated to Gia Long.

Also in the courtyard are still dragons, trapped in what look like phone boxes. On the other side of the courtyard is the long, low, red and gold To Mieu Temple itself. Inside are shrines to each of the emperors, topped by their photos. Under the French only the seven liked by the colonial power were thus honoured – Ham Nghi, Thanh Thai and Duy Tan were only added in 1959. The temple is flanked on the right by a small robing house and on the left by a shrine to soil god.

Behind each of these, a gate leads into the next part of the complex – a Divine Kitchen and Divine Storehouse sit on either side of a small walled enclosure housing the Hung To Mieu Temple. This is a restored 1951 reconstruction of the original, built in 1804 to honour Gia Long’s parents. Both temples were used by the court on death anniversaries, but women (including the Empress) were strictly forbidden.

Phung Tien Temple
Behind To Mieu, Phung Tien Temple still lies in ruins. It once served a similar purpose to the former, although women were permitted to worship here.

Dien Tho Residence
Behind the two temples is the stunning, partially ruined Dien Tho Residence (1804). This comprised the apartments and audience hall of the Queen Mothers of the Nguyen dynasty. The audience hall houses an exhibition of photos illustrating its former use, and there is a display of embroidered royal garments. Just outside is their Highnesses’ enchanting pleasure pavilion, a carved wooden building set above a lily pond.

Truong San Residence
The rebuilding of this war-devastated compound was near to completion at the time of research. This landscaped flower garden was originally constructed under Emperor Minh
Mang in 1822, comprising a crescent-shaped lake, a rockery, palace and pagoda. In 1844 Emperor Thieu Tri, acting like a latter-day magazine editor, listed it as one of the top 20 beautiful spots in Hué.

TINH TAM LAKE
In the middle of Tinh Tam Lake, which is 500m north of the Imperial Enclosure, are two islands connected by bridges. The emperors used to come here with their retinues to relax. Now the bridge has been appropriated by fishermen.

TANG TAU LAKE
An island on Tang Tau Lake, which is north-east of Tinh Tam Lake, was once the site of a royal library. It is now occupied by a small Theravada Buddhist pagoda, called Ngoc Huong Pagoda.

MUSEUMS

Museum of Royal Fine Arts
The beautiful hall that houses the Museum of Royal Fine Arts (3 B Le Truc; admission 22,000d; 7am-5pm) was built in 1845 and restored when the museum was founded in 1923. The walls are inscribed with poems written in nôm (Vietnamese script). The most precious artefacts were lost during the American War, but the ceramics, furniture and royal clothing that remain are well worth the visit. The outside courtyard has interesting ceremonial cinnamons, stone court sculptures and large brass bells and vats.

General Museum Complex
The equally exquisite building across the street was once a school for princes and the sons of high-ranking mandarins. It’s now a gallery, and forms part of the General Museum Complex (122 D Le Loi; admission free; 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sun). It combines, in an odd juxtaposition, a pagoda devoted to archaeology, a small Natural History Museum and a building devoted to the ‘movement of revolutionary struggle and anti-French colonialism resistance war’. There’s a tank collection out front.

Ho Chi Minh Museum
On display at this museum (822 152; 7 B Le Loi; admission 10,000d; 7am-2pm Tue-Sun) are photographs, some of Ho Chi Minh’s personal effects, and documents relating to his life and accomplishments. All have English captions.

PAGODAS

Bao Quoc Pagoda
Last renovated in 1957, Bao Quoc Pagoda (Pagoda Which Serves the Country; 820 488; Ham Long Hill) was founded in 1670 by Giac Phong, a Buddhist monk from China. It was given its present name in 1824 by Emperor Minh Mang, who celebrated his 40th birthday here in 1830. To get here, head south from D Le Loi on D Dien Bien Phu and turn first right after crossing the railway tracks.

Dieu De National Pagoda
The entrance to Dieu De National Pagoda (Quoc Tu Dieu De; 102 B Bach Dang), built under Emperor Thieu Tri’s rule (1841–47), is along Dong Ba Canal. It is one of the city’s three ‘national pagodas’, which were once under the direct patronage of the emperor. Dieu De is famous for its four low towers, one to either side of the gate and two flanking the sanctuary. There are bells in two of the towers; the others contain a drum and a stele dedicated to the emperor.

During the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem (1955–63) and through the mid-1960s, Dieu De National Pagoda was a stronghold of Buddhist and student opposition to the South Vietnamese government and the war. In 1966 the pagoda was stormed by police, who confiscated the opposition movement’s radio equipment and arrested many monks, laypeople and students.

The pavilions on either side of the main sanctuary entrance contain the 18 La Ha, whose rank is just below that of Bodhisattva, and the eight Kim Cang, protectors of Buddha. In the back row of the main dais is Thich Ca Buddha flanked by two assistants.

Chieu Ung Pagoda
Founded by the Hainan Chinese Congregation in the mid-19th century, Chieu Ung Pagoda (Chieu Ung Tu; opposite 138 B Chilang) was rebuilt in 1908. The pagoda’s sanctuary retains its original ornamentation, which is becoming faded but has been mercifully unaffected by the third-rate modernistic renovations that have marred other such structures. The pagoda was built as a memorial to 108 Hainan merchants, who were mistaken for pirates and killed in Vietnam in 1851.

Chua Ong Pagoda
Founded by Hue’s Fujian Chinese Congregation during the reign of Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc (1848–83), Chua Ong Pagoda (opposite 224 B Chilang) was severely damaged during the Tet Offensive when a nearby ammunition ship blew up. A gold Buddha sits in a glass case opposite the main doors of the sanctuary. The left-hand altar is dedicated to the goddess of the sea, Thien Hau Thanh Mau, who is flanked by her two assistants, 1000-eyed Thien Ly Nhan and red-faced Thuan Phong Nhi, who can hear for 1000 miles.

NATIONAL SCHOOL
One of the most famous secondary schools in Vietnam, the National School (Truong Quoc Ho; 10 B Le Loi; after 3pm) was founded in 1896 and run by Ngo Dinh Kha, the father of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem. Many of the school’s pupils later rose to prominence in both North and South Vietnam. One of them was General Vo Nguyen Giap, strategist of the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu and North Vietnam’s long-serving deputy premier, defence minister and commander-in-chief. Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam’s prime minister for over a quarter of a century, and the secretary-general and former prime minister Do Muoi also studied here. Even Ho Chi Minh attended the school briefly in 1908.

The school was given a major renovation in 1996 to celebrate its 100th anniversary and a statue of Ho Chi Minh was erected. The National School cannot be visited until after classes finish.

BOAT TRIPS
Many sights in the vicinity of Hué, including Thuan An Beach, Thien Mu Pagoda and several of the Royal Tombs (p221), can be reached by a journey along the Perfume River.

Rates for chartering a boat are around 60,000d for an hour’s sightseeing on the river; a half-day charter to one or more sites will cost around 150,000d. Ask directly at any of the four main river-boat moorings on the south side of the river; it’s cheaper than chartering through an agency and you can negotiate your own route. Be clear on your requirements, preferably in writing: you may be finding yourself paying more for lunch at the family’s restaurant than for the boat.

Most hotels and travellers’ cafes are keen to arrange these tours, which typically take in the tombs of Tu Duc, Thieu Tri, Minh Mang and the Thien Mu Pagoda. Prices vary, but are generally implausibly cheap at around US$2 per person (which may include lunch but not entry fees). The journey takes about six hours, and usually runs from 8am to 2pm. Given the time constraints you’ll need to catch a motorbike to get from the moorings to the first two tombs. The third tomb’s less than a kilometre’s walk, but they’ll try to get you on a bike for that one as well. Once the various entry fees have been factored in, many travellers wish they had cycled or arranged a motorbike instead.

Sleeping

BUDGET
There are two main clusters of budget accommodation on the south side of the river. One is in the triangle formed by D Hung Vuong, D Nguyen Tri Phuong and D Haoi. The other is a few blocks north in the little lanes between D Le Loi and D Vo Theo Sau. The numerous guesthouses offer varying degrees of comfort for invariably cheap rates; given their proximity it’s easy to shop around. The trade-off is that this puts you in the heart of tourist town, where the hawkers swoop before your hotel door closes behind you.

Thai Binh Hotel (827 729; phongnha_hotel@yahoo .com; 10/10 D Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US$5-10; )

The facilities in this spotless minihotel differ from room to room, but what doesn’t change is the good reports we hear about the friendly and enthusiastic staff.

Binh Duong Hotel 2 (846 466; 8 D Ngo Ga Tu; r US$8-15; )

On a side street a little apart from the main tourist stream, this hotel has rooms ranging from cheapies with internal windows to larger ones with bathubs and balconies.

Thai Binh Hotel 1 (828 058; www.thainhhotel-hue .com; 6/34 D Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US$8-10; )

An excellent option, Thai Binh offers midrange standards at budget prices.

DMZ Hotel (826 831; 1A D Pham Ngu Lao; s/d US$9-14; )

From the people behind the popular tourist bar, this brand-new minihotel has a range of comfortable rooms of different sizes and facilities.

Minh Quang Guest House (824 152; 16 D Phan Chu Trinh; r US$10; )

Located near the railway station, a long way from tourist traps, this friendly family offers new, clean rooms with TVs, fridges and bathubs. English is not their strong point.

Bamboo Hotel (828 345; www.bamboohotel.net; 61 B Hung Vuong; s/d US$10/12; )

The owners
made an effort with the décor, with (unsurprisingly) bamboo decoration downstairs and elaborate green cornices in the rooms. The bedding’s nice and all the rooms have TVs, fridges and bathtubs.

**Our Pick**

**Thai Binh Hotel 2** (827 561; www.thaibinhhotel-hue.com; 2 D Luong The Vinh; r US$12-15;  )

The recently arrived, more upmarket sister of the longstanding budget favourite, Thai Binh 2 is excellent value for money. The attractive bedrooms have mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, while the bathrooms have tubs and novelty items like shower curtains. There are stunning views from balconies on the higher floors.

**Thanh Tan Hotel** (824 146; thanhtanhotel@hotmail.com; 12 D Nguyen Van Cu; s/d US$12/15;  )

A similar standard is set at this superb new place, just removed from the main tourist neighbourhood.

**Thanh Thao Hotel** (831 358; thanhthaohotel@yahoo.com; 33 D Nguyen Truong To; r US$250;  )

On what would be a quiet street near the Catholic cathedral if it weren’t for the railway tracks, Thanh Thao has comfortable rooms with good facilities including wi-fi internet access.

**Midrange**

**Duy Tan Hotel** (825 001; niki@duytanhotel.vn; 12 D Hung Vuong; s US$10-15;  )

About as central as it gets, the more expensive rooms are large and have bamboo blinds.

**Thanh Noi Hotel** (Imperial Garden; 522 478; thanhnoin@dong.vn.vn; 57 D Bang Dung; r US$18-45;  )

Located in a quiet street in the heart of the Citadel, near the Imperial Enclosure, the residential surroundings offer a very different view of Hué life. The peaceful tree-shaded compound has a restaurant and a fair-sized swimming pool with water jets.

**Hoa Hong Hotel** (824 377; hoahonghotel@dng.vnn.vn; 1 D Pham Ngu Lao; s US$25-70, d US$30-80;  )

Although a little although, the rooms are well-appointed – some with views, spa baths and (luxury of luxuries) shower curtains. Breakfast is included in the price.

**Ngoc Huong Hotel** (830 111; www.ngochuonghotel.com.vn; 8-10 D Chu Van An; US$30-40, st US$50;  )

Located in a popular part of town, this is a Jacobuzzi and sauna for winding down.

**Jacuzzi** and **Sauna** for winding down.

**Top End**

**La Residence Hotel & Spa** (837 475; www.laresidence-hue.com; 3 D Le Loi; s/d US$95-165;  )

Housed in the former French Governor’s residence, this chic boutique hotel has lovely river views, lush gardens and beautiful rooms. The Colonial suites are ostentatiously themed: Suite d’Ornithologue, Monuments d’Egypte and Voyage en Chine.

**Imperial Hotel** (882 222; www.imperial-hotel.com.vn; 8 D Hung Vuong; s US$159, st US$239-719;  )

Hello big boy! Critics will surely bemoan the arrival of historic Hué’s first hefty hotel tower – but this 16-floor, five-star melagah is actually pretty fab. The grand lobby has a dramatic lotus-shaped chandelier, and a number of excellent bars and restaurants carry on the opulence.

**Eating**

We have the famed fussy-eater Emperor Tu Duc to thank for the culinary variety of Hué (see p48). While the elaborate decoration of Imperial cuisine may seem a little silly, the degustation-style banquets are sublime – well worthy of a splurge. The best restaurants aren’t necessarily easy to find, and many tourists sadly settle for the Western-oriented eating places.

**Hung Vuong Inn** (831 068; 20 D Hung Vuong; r US$95-135, st US$150-165;  )

This popular place offers romantic dining in a lush garden. It specialises in central Vietnamese cuisine, and is the best place in Hué to catch a traditional music performance (from 7pm nightly). While it’s a regular stop for tour groups, they don’t tend to spoil the atmosphere – although they do slow the service down.

**Temples Restaurant** (830 716; 5 Ch Van An; dishes 22-85,000;  )

An alternative option, but this one has a stylish indoor dining room.

**La Carambole** (810 491; 19 D Pham Ngoc Lao; mains 25,000-90,000;  )

This vegetarian-friendly curry house is low on atmosphere but high on flavour.

**Drinking**

**Cath 24** (831 210; 64 D Le Loi) Based in and around the garden of a French-colonial home, this little café specialises in therapeutic herbal teas – although the less pure will also find caffeine and alcohol on offer. At night it’s particularly romantic, lit up with oil lamps. Order a drink and free plates of crackers, bread and fruit keep arriving.

**DMZ Bar & Café** (44 D Le Loi) Long the leading late-night spot, the beer flows into the night, the tunes match the mood and there is a popular pool table in the middle of things.

**Bar Why Not?** (824 793; 210 Vo Thi Sau) Loud rock music, cheap cocktails and a pool table make for a winning formula. Why not, indeed?

**King’s Panorama Bar** (882 222; www.imperial-hotel.com.vn; 8 D Hung Vuong; 7am-midnight) Quite the swankiest (and priciest) hotel in town, the rooftop of the Imperial Hotel has tasteful décor and unhindered views.

**Shopping**

Hué produces the finest conical hats in Viet nam. The city’s speciality is ‘poem hats’, which, when held up to the light, reveal shadowy scenes of daily life. It’s also home to one of the largest and most beautiful selections of rice-paper and silk paintings available in Vietnam, but the prices quoted are usually inflated to about four times the real price.

**Don Ba Market** (821 821; 1 D Tran Huong Dao; 6.30am-8pm) On the Perfume River north of Trang Tien Bridge, this is Hué’s largest market, where anything and everything can be bought.

**Getting There & Away**

**AIR**

The main office of Vietnam Airlines (824 709; 23 D Nguyen Van Cu; 7.15-11.15am & 1-4.30pm Mon-Sat) handles reservations. Several flights a day connect Huế to both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).
BUS
The main bus station is 4km to the southeast on the continuation of Đ Ưng Vuong (it becomes Đ An Duong Vuong and Đ An Thuy Vuong). The first main stop south is Danang (40,000d, three hours, six daily). An Hoa bus station (Hwy 1A), northwest of the Citadel, serves northern destinations, including Dong Ha (25,000d, 1½ hours).

Hue is a regular stop on the open-tour bus routes. Most will drop passengers off around the Đ Ưng Vuong tourist ghetto and pick up from the hotels. Expect a complete circus when the bus stops, as you’re likely to be followed by several persistent touts, all keen to direct your wallet to their hotel.

The main bus station is 4km to the southeast (Hwy 1A) of the Citadel. The bus station is at the southwestern end of Đ Lê Loi. Destinations include Ninh Binh (205,000d, 12½ to 13½ hours, three daily), Vinh (143,000d, 6½ to 10 hours, seven daily), Dong Hoi (65,000d, 2½ to 5½ hours, eight daily), Dong Ha (25,000d, 1½ to 2½ hours, six daily) and Danang (40,000d, 2½ to four hours, seven daily).

Getting Around
TO/FROM THE AIRPORT
Hue is served by Phu Bai Airport, once an important US air base, 1km south of the city centre. Taxi fares are typically around US$8, although shared taxis cost as little as US$2 – inquire at hotels to find these vehicles. Vietnam Airlines († 024 709; 23 B Nguyễn Văn Cu; † 7.15-11.15am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) runs its own minibus from its office to the airport, a couple of hours before flight times (tickets 20,000d).

BICYCLE, MOTORBIKE & CAR HIRE
Pedal power is a fun way to tour Hue and the nearby Royal Tombs. Many hotels rent out bicycles for about US$1 per day. Self-drive motorbikes are available from US$5. A car with driver is available from US$25 per day.

CYCLO & XE OM
While Hue is an easy city to walk around, a typical street scene is a foreigner walking down the street with two cyclos (pedicab or bicycle rickshaw) and a motorbike in hot pursuit – the drivers yelling, ‘hello cyclo’ and ‘hello motorbike’ and the foreigner yelling, ‘no, thank you, no!’ There’s a pretty standard fare for both of 10,000d per kilometre.

TAXI
There are several metered taxi companies in Hué. Try Co Do Taxi († 830 830), Gili († 828 282), Mai Linh († 898 889) or Phu Xuan († 87 87 87).

AROUND HUE
Thien Mu Pagoda
Built on a hillock overlooking the Perfume River, 4km southwest of the Citadel, this pagoda (Linh Mu; admission free) is an icon of Vietnam. Thien Mu contains the existing 31m-high octagonal tower, Thap Phuoc Duyen, was constructed under the reign of emperor Thieu Tri in 1844 and has become the unofficial symbol of the city. Each of the seven storeys is dedicated to a manushi-buddha, which is a Buddha that appeared in human form.

Thien Mu Pagoda was originally founded in 1601 by Nguyen Hoang, governor of Thuan Hoa province. According to legend, a Fairy Woman (Thien Mu) appeared and told the people that a lord would come to build a pagoda for the country’s prosperity. On hearing this, Nguyen Hoang ordered a pagoda to be constructed here. Over the centuries its buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Since the 1960s it has been a flashpoint of political demonstrations (see p222).

To the right of the tower is a pavilion containing a stele dating from 1715. It is set on the back of a massive marble turtle, a symbol of longevity. To the left of the tower is another six-sided pavilion, this one sheltering an enormous bell, Dai Hong Chung, which was cast in 1710 and weighs 2052kg; it is said to be audible 10km away. In the main sanctuary, in a case behind the bronze laughing Buddha, are three statues: A Di Da, the Buddha of the Past; Thich Ca, the historical Buddha (Sakyamuni); and Di Lac Buddha, the Buddha of the Future.

For a nice bicycle ride, head southwest (parallel to the Perfume River) on riverside D Tran Hung Dao, which turns into Đ Le Duan after passing Phu Xuan Bridge. Cross the railway tracks and keep going on Đ Kim Long. Thien Mu Pagoda can also be reached by dragon boat and a visit is included in most city tours.

Royal Tombs
The tombs († 6.30am-5.30pm, 7am-5pm in winter) of the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945) are extravagant mausoleums, constructed...
A FIERY PROTEST

Behind the main sanctuary of the Thien Mu Pagoda is the Austin motorcar that transported the monk Thich Quang Duc to the site of his 1963 self-immolation. Thich Quang Duc travelled to Saigon and publicly burned himself to death to protest the policies of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. A famous photograph of his act was printed on the front pages of newspapers around the world. His death soon inspired a number of other self-immolations.

The response of the president’s notorious sister-in-law, Tran Le Xuan (Madame Nhu), was to happily proclaim the self-immolations a ‘barbecue party', saying ‘Let them burn and we shall clap our hands’. Her statements greatly added to the already substantial public disgust with Diem’s regime; the US press labelled Madame Nhu the ‘Iron Butterfly’ and ‘Dragon Lady’. In November both President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu (Madame Nhu’s husband) were assassinated by Diem’s own military. Madame Nhu was overseas at the time.

Another self-immolation sparked more protest in 1993. In this instance a man arrived at the pagoda and, after leaving offerings, set himself alight chanting the word ‘Buddha’. Although the man’s motivation remains a mystery, this set off a chain of events whereby the pagoda’s leading monks were arrested, linked with the independent United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the banned alternative to the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Church. This led to an official complaint to the UN by the International Federation of Human Rights accusing the Vietnamese government of violating its own constitution, protecting freedom of religion.

The majestic and serene tomb of Tu Duc (admission 55,000d) is set amid frangipani and pine trees. Emperor Tu Duc designed the exquisitely harmonious tomb, which was constructed between 1864 and 1867, for use both before and after his death. The enormous expense of the tomb and the forced labour used in its construction spawned a coup plot that was discovered and suppressed in 1866.

It is said that Tu Duc, who had the longest reign of any Nguyen monarch (1848–83), lived a life of ultimate imperial luxury. Though he had 104 wives and countless concubines, he had no offspring. One theory has it that he became sterile after contracting smallpox.

His tomb is entered from the southeast via Vu Khieu Gate. A path leads to a boat landing on the shore of a lake. The island to the right is where Tu Duc used to hunt small game. Across the water to the left is Xung Khieu Pavilion, built on piles over the water, where the emperor would sit among the columns with his concubines, composing or reciting poetry.

Across the courtyard from the landing are steps leading to Hoa Khiem Temple, where Tu Duc and Empress Hoang Le Thien Anh (Tu Duc’s wife) are worshipped. Before his death, Tu Duc used this as a palace, staying here during his long visits to the complex. It contains a number of interesting items, including two thrones, the larger of which was for the empress (Tu Duc was only 153cm tall). Minh Khiem Chamber, to the right behind Hoa Khiem Temple, was originally built for use as a theatre. Tu Duc’s mother, Tu Du, is worshipped in Luong Khiem Temple, directly behind Hoa Khiem Temple.

At the bottom of the stairway, the path continues along the shore of the lake to the Honour Courtyard. Across the lake are the tombs of Tu Duc’s adopted son, Emperor Kien Phuc, who ruled for only seven months (1883–84), and Empress Hoang Le Thien Anh. After walking between the honour guard of elephants, horses and diminutive mandarins (they were made even shorter than the emperor), you reach the Stele Pavilion, which shelters a stone tablet weighing about 20 tonnes. It took four years to transport the stele, the largest in Vietnam, 500km from near Thanh Hoa in the north. Tu Duc drafted the inscriptions himself in order to clarify certain aspects of his reign. He freely admitted that he had made mistakes and chose to name his tomb Khkiem, which means ‘modest’. The two nearby towers symbolise the emperor’s power.

Tu Duc’s tomb, enclosed by a wall, is on the other side of a half-moon-shaped lake. He was never actually interred here. The site where his remains were buried (along with great treasure) is not known. Because of the danger of grave robbers, extreme measures were taken to keep the location secret – every one of the 200 servants who buried the king was beheaded.

Tu Duc’s tomb is about 5km south of Hué on Van Nien Hill in Duong Xuan Thuong Village.

TOMB OF DONG KHANH

The smallest of the Royal Tombs, Dong Khanh’s mausoleum (admission 30,000d) was built in 1889. Emperor Dong Khanh was the nephew and adopted son of Tu Duc, and was placed on the throne by the French after they captured his predecessor, Ham Nghi. Predictably, Dong Khanh proved docile; he ruled from 1885 until his death three years later.

Seldom visited, there is a certain serenity here. It is just over 5km from the city, 500m behind the tomb of Tu Duc.

TOMB OF THIEU TRI

Construction of the tomb of Thieu Tri (admission 22,000d), who ruled from 1841 to 1847, was completed in 1848. It is the only Royal Tomb not enclosed by a wall. The tomb has a similar floor plan to his father Minh Mang’s tomb but is substantially smaller.

During his lifetime, an effort to preserve Vietnamese independence by cracking down on missionaries resulted in a French naval attack in 1847, where Vietnam’s coastal forts were destroyed and three junks sunk. The emperor’s response was to decree that all Christians be summarily executed. The orders were never followed and Thieu Tri died shortly afterwards.

The tomb is about 7km from Hué, in a peaceful rural landscape, and is off the tourist trail. If you’re walking, cycling or on a motorbike, there’s a pretty 2km or so cross-country trail that leads here from the tomb of Dong Khanh.

TOMB OF KHAO DINH

The hillside tomb of Kha Dinh (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1916 to 1925, is perhaps symptomatic of the decline of Vietnamese culture during the colonial era. Begun in 1920 and completed in 1931, the grandiose concrete structure is completely unlike Hué’s other tombs, being a synthesis of Vietnamese and European elements. Even the stone faces of the mandarin honour guards are endowed with a mixture of Vietnamese and European features.

After climbing 36 steps between four dragon banisters, you reach the first courtyard, flanked by two pavilions. The Honour Courtyard, with its rows of elephants, horses and menhirs, is set amid frangipani and pine trees.

REGAL RESTING PLACES

Although all are unique in structure and design, most of the mausoleums consist of five parts:

★ A stele pavilion in which the accomplishments, exploits and virtues of the deceased emperor are engraved on a marble tablet, usually written by the dead ruler’s successor.

★ A temple for the worship of the emperor and empress. In front of each altar, on which the deceased ruler’s funerary tablets were placed, is an ornate dais that once held items the emperor used every day, such as his betel-nut trays and cigarette cases.

★ A sepulchre, usually inside a square or circular enclosure, where the emperor’s remains are buried.

★ An honour courtyard paved with dark-brown bat trang bricks, along the sides of which stand stone elephants, horses, and civil and military mandarins. The civil mandarins wear square hats and hold an ivory sceptre, the symbol of their authority; the military mandarins wear round hats and hold swords.

★ A lotus pond surrounded by frangipani and pine trees.

Almost all of the tombs, which are in walled compounds, were planned by the Nguyen emperors during their lifetimes. Many of the precious ornaments that were once reposited in the tombs disappeared during Vietnam’s wars.
and mandarins, is 26 steps further up the hillside. In the centre of the courtyard is an octagonal Stele Pavilion.

Up three more flights of stairs is the main building, Thien Dinh, which is divided into three halls. The walls and ceiling are decorated with murals of the Four Seasons, Eight Precious Objects and Eight Fairies. Under a graceless, one-tonne concrete canopy is a gilt statue of Khai Dinh in regalia. His remains are interred 18m below the statue and he is worshipped in the last hall.

The tomb of Khai Dinh is 10km from Huế, in Chau Chu Village.

TOMB OF MINH MANG

Perhaps the most majestic of all of the Royal Tombs is that of Minh Mang (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1820 to 1840. Renowned for its architecture, which harmoniously blends into the natural surroundings, the tomb was planned during Minh Mang’s lifetime and built between 1841 and 1843 by his successor.

The Honour Courtyard is reached via three gates on the eastern side of the wall. Three granite staircases lead from the courtyard to the square Stele Pavilion (Dinh Vuong). Nearby there once stood an altar on which buffaloes, horses and pigs were sacrificed.

Sung An Temple, dedicated to Minh Mang and his empress, is reached via three terraces and Dien Duc Gate. On the other side of the temple, three stone bridges span Trung Minh Ho Lake (of Impeccable Clarity). The central bridge, Cau Trung Dao, constructed of marble, was for the emperor’s use only. Minh Lau Pavilion stands on the top of three superimposed terraces that represent the ‘three powers’: the heavens, the earth and water. Visible to the left is the Fresh Air Pavilion; the Angling Pavilion is to the right.

From a stone bridge across crescent-shaped Tam Nguyet Lake (Lake of the New Moon), a monumental staircase with dragon banisters leads to the sepulchre, which is surrounded by a circular wall symbolising the sun. Behind the bronze door in the middle of the enclosure is the emperor’s burial place: a mound of earth covered with mature pine trees and dense shrubbery.

The tomb of Minh Mang, which is on Cam Ke Hill in An Bang Village, is over the bridge on the west bank of the Perfume River, about 12km from Huế.

TOMB OF GIA LONG

Emperor Gia Long, who founded the Nguyen dynasty in 1802 and ruled until 1819, ordered the construction of his tomb in 1814. According to royal annals, the emperor himself chose the site after scouting the area on the back of an elephant. The rarely visited tomb (admission free), which is presently in a state of ruin, is around 1.4km south of Huế and 3km from the west bank of the Perfume River.

Temple of Nam Giao

The Temple of Nam Giao (Temple of Heaven; admission free) was once the most important religious site in all of Vietnam. It was here that, every three years, the emperor solemnly offered elaborate sacrifices to the All-Highest Emperor of the August Heaven (Thuong De). The topmost esplanade, which represents heaven, is round, while the middle terrace, representing earth, is square, as is the lowest terrace representing humanity.

After reunification, the provincial government erected an obelisk in memory of soldiers killed in the American War on the site where the sacrificial altar had once stood. There was strong public sentiment in Huế against the obelisk and it was finally torn down in 1993. Nam Giao remains unrestored and crumbling.

To find it, head south on D Dien Bien Phu for nearly 2km after the railway tracks.

Thanh Toan Bridge

Situated 7km east of central Huế, the Thanh Toan Bridge is a classic covered Japanese footbridge. Architecturally similar to its cousin in Hoi An, it receives far fewer visitors – it’s mostly used by local villagers for naps in the shady walkway.

The bridge is best reached by motorbike or bicycle. Finding it is a bit tricky, but tolerable if you consider getting lost part of the excursion. Head north for a few hundred metres on D Ba Trieu until you see a sign to the Citadel Hotel. Turn right here and follow the bumpy dirt road for another 6km past villages, rice paddies and several pagodas until you reach the bridge.

Duong No Village

The peaceful village of Duong No makes for a refreshing trip from Huế. The main attraction here is the well-preserved, modest and beautiful Ho Chi Minh’s House (Nha Bac Ho; admission free), where Uncle Ho lived from 1898 to 1900. Walk a few metres further along the riverbank to Ben Da, the steps down to the water where Ho bathed. Another 300m or so beyond them, over a quaint bridge, is an Am Ba ('female spirit' temple). It’s in some disrepair, but it’s quiet and contemplative, with ceramic mosaic work decorating the walls.

Duong No, 6km northeast of Huế, can easily be reached by bicycle or motorbike. Look for a small wooden sign on the left at a bridge off the main road; cross over the bridge and turn immediately right. Ho Chi Minh’s House is a few hundred metres along the riverbank. The road can be made by following the path beside the house to a road at the end; turn left and continue through a pretty rural village for a couple of kilometres. Turn left again, and the road rejoins the bridge to the main road.

Thuan An to Vinh Hien

Thuan An Beach, 15km northeast of Huế, is on a splendid lagoon near the mouth of the Perfume River, at the tip of a long, thin island. It’s lovely for beachcombing, and is quite undeveloped except for a few kiosks, but between September and April the water’s often too rough to swim in.

It is joined to the mainland by a short bridge, and beyond the beach a 50km scenic road (Hwy 49, though you’d never guess) stretches the length of the undeveloped island (no maps give it a name) from Thuan An to Vinh Hien. This makes a great day trip by motorbike or car from Huế. It also offers an alternative route to or from Huế for travellers making their way on two wheels along the coast road.

Coming from Thuan An, the island is skinny and the road winds along with the lagoon on one side and the ocean on the other. There are several villages on the way with stacks of enormous mào mân (fish sauce) jars lining the outer walls of many houses, and miles of fertile raised vegetable gardens. But most extraordinary are the vast, colourful and opulent graves and family temples lining the riverbank to a road at the end; turn left and continue through a pretty rural village for a couple of kilometres. Turn left again, and the road rejoins the bridge to the main road.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are at least three options for driving this road: two for day-trippers from Huế, and one for through travellers.

Those on day trips can just drive as far as they like and then return to Thuan An. An alternative is to drive to Vinh Tanh and, about halfway along the road, turn right and head to a wharf where a ferry runs back and forth across the lagoon until about 4pm. The 20-minute crossing costs 5000d for motorbikes and 30,000d for cars, and moors 13km from Hwy 1A, a little south of Phu Bai Airport.

An option for through travellers continuing south after visiting Huế – on motorbikes and bicycles only – is to make your way to Vinh Hien and, from there, catch a public boat to Cau Hai on the mainland, close to the Bach Ma National Park access road. The cost for two people and a motorbike is 5000d, and the journey takes an hour or so. Be aware that weather conditions affect the running of the boats, so be prepared to backtrack if necessary.

BACH MA NATIONAL PARK

A French-era hill station, Bach Ma National Park (Vuon Quoc Gia Bach Ma; 871 330; www.bachma.vn; adult 10,500d/child 5500d/child under 5 free) reaches a peak at 1450m at Bach Ma mountain, only 18km from the coast. The cooler climate attracted the French, who started building villas here in 1930; by 1937 the number of holiday homes had reached 139 and it became known as the ‘Dalat of central Vietnam’. Most of the visitors were high-ranking French VIPs. Not surprisingly the Viet Minh tried hard to spoil the holiday – the area saw some heavy fighting in the early 1950s. After independence from the French, Bach Ma was soon forgotten and the villas abandoned; today they are in total ruin and only a few stone walls remain.

Bach Ma has some stunning views across the coastline near Hai Van Pass, which the Americans used to their advantage: during the war, US troops turned the area into a fortified bunker. The VC did their best to harass the Americans, but couldn’t dislodge them. Between the eerie remains and memories of the American War, spooky stories abound and locals maintain that the park is a realm of ghosts.

In 1991, 22,031 hectares of land were set aside as a nature preserve and designated Bach Ma National Park.
Bach Ma is the wettest place in Vietnam, with the heaviest of the rain falling in October and November. With the wet weather come plenty of leeches. Still, even these months are not out of the question for visiting. The best time to visit Bach Ma is from February to September, particularly between March and June, for what’s likely to be the best weather.

Sleeping & Eating
National Park Guesthouse (☎ 887 310; camp sites per person 30,000d, 6-person tents 80,000d, entrance r 100,000-120,000d, summit dm 120,000d, r 150,000-300,000d) The park authority has a small camping ground and four guesthouses near the summit and two more guesthouses near the entrance. One of the summit guesthouses has a 12-person dorm with a shared bathroom. The more expensive twin-bed rooms are a better bet for views and facilities. This is a prime spot, rebuilt from the ruins of Emperor Bao Dai’s summer retreat. Bookings should be made at the Visitor Centre. Give at least four hours’ notice for meal requirements, as fresh food is brought up to the park from the market on demand.

Several private companies have recently built low-key accommodation in the park, under the watchful eye of the park authorities. Near the summit trail, Morin-Bach Ma Hotel (☎ 887 111; www.huonggiangtourist.com/huonggiangtourist/hotel/Bachma_Hotel.htm; s/d US$25/30), built in a French style, offers some smart rooms with balconies.

Getting There & Away
Bach Ma is 28km west of Lang Co and 40km southeast of Huế. The turn-off is signposted in the town of Cau Hai on Hwy 1A. The entrance is 3km along the narrow road into the park. The main spring is about 150m beyond the main area. There are buses to the park from Danang (US$3, two hours) and Huế (US$2, one hour). Local buses stop at Cau Hai, where xe om drivers can ferry you to the entrance. Cau Hai also has a train station (☎ 871 362; Loc Linh village), but the one daily service in either direction is slow and arrives/departs at antisocial times.

Getting Around
Your visit will be much easier if you can hire a vehicle for your time in the park, especially if you plan to walk some of the trails, as they are spread along the 16km summit-access road.

SUOI VOI (ELEPHANT SPRINGS)
About 15km north of Lang Co Beach, Suoi Voi (admission 10,000d, plus per car 10,000d per motorbike 2000d) is a secluded recreation area, where you can easily spend a half-day traipsing through the forest and swimming in cool, crystal-clear streams. It’s a pleasant detour and is recommended for motorbikers and cyclists who are braving their way along Hwy 1A.

The main springs are a short walk from the parking area. The natural pool is ringed by huge boulders – one vaguely in the shape of an elephant’s head, and cosmetically enhanced to look more like it. The stream turns into a hydro-slide over the smooth rocks. Further exploration will lead to less-populated swimming holes, including the Vung Do Pool, about 200m beyond the main area.

Foreign visitors here are scarce and on weekdays you may have the whole place to yourself. Weekends, however, are jam-packed with Vietnamese, notably young couples exploring the birds and bees.

To reach the springs from Hwy 1A, turn inland at the road marker reading ‘Dang 52km’ (if coming from the north) or ‘Phu Bai 44km’ (if heading from the south). You will see the 19th-century Thua Lau Church just ahead of you. Keep the church on your left and follow the dirt road for 5km to the entry gate. Buy a ticket here and hold onto it as you may be asked to show it more than once. From here it’s a bumpy 1.5km to the parking area. Along the way you’ll pass basic bungalows (no hot water) for rent at Hoa Thin 1 (☎ 054-891 805; r 150,000d). One suspects they’re often used for, ahem, short-term stays on the weekends.

There are some simple food stalls near the springs, but it’s better to bring a picnic.

LANG CO BEACH
Lang Co is an attractive, island-like stretch of palm-shaded white sand, with a crystal-clear, turquoise lagoon on one side and 10 kilometres of beachfront on the other. Unfortunately the beach and the edges of the lagoon can turn into litter traps. Many open-tour buses make a lunch stop here and it makes a fine place to hop off for a night or two, depending on the weather.

The beach is best enjoyed between April and July. From late August till November rains are frequent, and from December to March it can get chilly. Lang Co was devastated by a
major typhoon in late 2006, but within a few weeks all of the resorts had reopened and rebuilding was well underway.

There are spectacular views of Lang Co from the Hai Van Pass and from the trains linking Danang and Huế. Most of the accommodation is north of the town along the highway.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Lang Co Hotel** [874 426; codolangco@dng.vnn.vn; r US$15-20, bungalow US$35] 1 This beachside pad offers the choice of bungalows set in a shaded garden compound or a block of big, well-priced rooms, although the cheapest don’t have hot water.

**Thanh Tam Seaside Resort** [874 456; fax 873 762; r US$60-70] Situated about 1km north of Lang Co Hotel is this collection of beachside bungalows. The terrace restaurant has great views and is a popular seafood stop for tourists making the journey between Huế and Danang.

**Lang Co Beach Resort** [873 555; www.lanoco_beachresort.com.vn; r US$50-70] Set amid lavish landscaped gardens, this is the most upmarket option in Lang Co. Rooms have nice linen, and facilities include a large pool, fitness centre and wireless internet in the attractive Chinese-style reception.

The new guesthouses have sprung up on the lagoon side of the road, only a short stroll to the beach. Opposite Lang Co Beach Resort, **Chi Na Guesthouse** [874 597; r US$10] offers cheap rooms, and the friendly family speak some English.

**Getting There & Away**

Lang Co is just on the other side of the new Hai Van Tunnel from Danang, which has reduced the distance to 20km. Tourist buses pass through daily, en route for Huế, Danang and Hoi An, with all tickets costing just US$2.

However, those on two wheels will still need to take the 35km scenic route over the Hai Van Pass.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Lang Co Hotel**

The Hai Van (Sea Cloud) Pass crosses over a spur of the Truong Son Mountain Range that justs into the sea. About 30km north of Danang, the road climbs to an elevation of 496m, south of the Ai Van Son peak (1172m). It’s an incredibly mountainous stretch of highway with spectacular views. The railway track, with many tunnels, goes around the peninsula, following the beautiful and deserted shoreline to avoid the hills.

In the 15th century this pass formed the boundary between Vietnam and the Kingdom of Champa. Until the American War it was heavily forested. At the summit is a bullet-scarred French fort, later used as a bunker by the South Vietnamese and US armies, with incredible views over Lang Co.

If you cross in winter, the pass serves as something of a visible dividing line between the climates of the north and south. Acting as a virtual wall, it protects Danang from the fierce ‘Chinease winds’ that sweep in from the northeast. From about November to March the exposed Lang Co side of the pass can be uncomfortably wet and chilly, while just to the south it’s warm and dry. When the winter weather is lousy in Huế, it is usually good in Danang.

At the top of the pass you’ll have to fight off a rather large crowd of very persistent vendors. You would be wise not to change money with anyone here, as you’re more than likely to get short-changed.

In 2005 the 6280m-long Hai Van Tunnel opened, using Austrian technology, bypassing the Pass and shaving an hour off the journey between Danang and Huế. Motorcycles and bikes are not permitted in the tunnel, but most cars and buses now take this route. The diversion of this traffic from the Pass road has made it a much safer and more enjoyable route, although you may still find yourself playing chicken with a suicidal truck driver.

**BA NA HILL STATION**

[0511 / elevation 1485m] It’s easy to see why the French would run to the hills at the first opportunity, and why the Vietnamese were less keen. As you climb the winding road to beautiful **Ba Na** (admission fee at the Reception Centre at the bottom of the access road. From here it’s a steep climb uphill, and many motorbikes won’t attempt it. Shuttle buses, leaving when full, take passengers up the mountain for 20,000d (30,000d return). Otherwise you can hire a Ba Na local with a high-powered motorcycle for the trip (60,000d).

**SUOI MO**

A short detour on the way to Ba Na, the waterfall at **Suoi Mo** (Dream Springs, admission 3000d) has some clear swimming holes for a dip. It’s a pretty, undeveloped spot, if you can ignore the litter; go on a weekday to avoid the crowds.

Suoi Mo is clearly signposted from the road to Ba Na. Continue up the bumpy track for 2km or so and look for a small arrowed sign on the left. Park here and walk along the track that leads off to the right beside a few houses. A 20-minute climb (slippery when wet) brings you to a waterfall.

**DANANG**

[0511 / pop 781,000] While most tourists neglect Vietnam’s fourth-largest city in favour of nearby Huế and Hoi An, Danang has considerable charm in its own right. The economic powerhouse of central Vietnam, it combines the buzz of a bigger city with beautiful beaches and great restaurants. A lot of money has recently poured into tree-lined boulevards, bridges and beachside resorts.

Back in the heady days of the American War, Danang was referred to as the ‘Saigon of the North’. This held a note of both praise and condemnation: like its big southern sister, Danang was notable for its booming economy, fine restaurants, busy traffic and glittering shops. Entertaining the soldiers from the nearby American base was a profitable business – bars and prostitution were major industries, and that sleazy legacy lingers. Men travelling together or alone may find themselves (or more accurately, their wallets) subjected to unwanted attention even in the ritziest of bars.

Danang marks the northern limits of Vietnam’s tropical zone and boasts a pleasant climate all year round.

**History**

Known during French colonial rule as Tou- ran, Danang succeeded Hoi An as the most important port in central Vietnam during the 19th century, and it remains the principal one for central Vietnam.
In March 1975 Danang, the second-largest city in South Vietnam, was the scene of utter chaos. Saigon government forces were ordered to abandon Hué, while Quang Ngai had fallen to the communists, cutting South Vietnam in two. Desperate civilians tried to flee the city, as some soldiers of the South Vietnamese army engaged in looting, pillage and rape. On 29 March 1975, two truckloads of communist guerrillas, more than half of them women, drove into what had been the most heavily defended city in South Vietnam and, without firing a shot, declared Danang liberated.

Orientation
Danang is on the western bank of the Han River. The city is part of a long, thin peninsula, at the northern tip of which is Nui Son Tra (called Monkey Mountain by US soldiers). China Beach and the Marble Mountains lie south of the city, and the Hai Van Pass overlooks Danang from the northwest.

Maps
The Danang Tourist Map is a pocket-sized foldout that is available for 8000d in bookshops and hotels in Danang and Hoi An.

Information
INTERNET ACCESS
These internet cafés scattered all over Danang, including several by the river on Đ Bạch Đằng, are open from 7am to 10pm. Most have reasonably fast connections.

MEDICAL SERVICES
Danang Family Medical Practice (Map p230; 582 700; 50-52 Đ Nguyên Văn Linh) Set up like a mini hospital with in-patient facilities, this excellent practice has sister clinics in Hanoi and HCMC. This branch is run by an Australian doctor and the friendly staff speak excellent English.

Hospital C (Map p230; Bế Văn C; 821 483; 122 Đ Hai Phong) The most advanced of the four hospitals in town.

Money
Vietcombank (Map p230; 823 303; 140 Đ Lê Lợi) The best place to change travellers cheques.

Vietcombank ATM (Map p230; 177 Tran Phu) Outside the Bamboo Green Riverside.

Post
Main post office (Map p230; B 302; Ð Bạch Đằng) Near the Song Han bridge.

Travel agencies
Cuong Easy Ride’s Tours (090-5173 903) A one-man operation offering day trips (around 240,000d) or longer tours on the back of his bike. He’s a friendly guy who speaks good English, has a spare helmet and doesn’t drive like a maniac.

Dana Tours (Map p230; 825 653; www.vietnamwelcomes.com; 76 Đ Hùng Vương; Mon-Sat) Offers car rentals, boat trips, visa extensions and treks in nearby Ba Na or Bach Ma.

Sights & activities
Museum of Cham Sculpture
The leading sight in Danang is the internationally renowned Museum of Cham Sculpture (Báo Tang Diêu Khắc Champa Da Nang; Map p230; cnr Đ Trương Vu Nhu & Đ Bạch Đằng; admission 30,000d; 7am-5pm). Founded in 1915 by the École Française d’Études Orientales, this collection is the finest of its kind in the world. Many of the sandstone carvings – including altars, lingas (see p265), garudas, Ganeshas, and...
images of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu – are exquisitely detailed. Allow yourself at least a good hour to soak it up.

The museum’s artefacts, which date from the 7th to 15th centuries, were discovered at Dong Duong (Indrapura), Khuong My, My Son (see p262), Tra Kieu (see p266) and other sites, mostly in Quang Nam and Danang provinces. The museum’s rooms are named after the localities in which the objects displayed were found.

A trilingual (Vietnamese, English and French) guidebook about the museum, Museum of Cham Sculpture – Danang, was written by its director, Tran Ky Phuong, who is Vietnam’s most eminent scholar of Cham civilisation. The book provides excellent background on the art of Champa and details on the museum’s exhibits. It’s usually on sale at the entrance.

Guides (some better than others) wait at the entrance of the museum to offer their services, but agree on a price before you begin.

HO CHI MINH MUSEUM
There are three sections to the Ho Chi Minh Museum (Map p236; 615 982; 3 D Nguyen Van Troi; admission free; 7-11am & 1.30-4.30pm) – a museum of military history in front of which US, Soviet and Chinese weaponry is displayed; a replica of Ho Chi Minh’s house in Hanoi (complete with a small lake); and, across the pond from the house, a museum solely about Uncle Ho.

It’s easy to tire of Vietnam’s numerous military and Ho Chi Minh museums. This one isn’t bad, but don’t bother if you’re visiting the larger incarnations in Hanoi or HCMC. The museum is 250m west of D Nui Thanh.

DANANG WATERPARK
The enormous water park (Map p236; adult/child 40,000/30,000; 7.30am-6.30pm Wed-Mon) is lots of fun – and not just for kids – with slides, pools and the like. It’s on the riverbank, 2km beyond the Ho Chi Minh Museum.

DANANG CATHEDRAL
Known to locals as Con Ga Church (Rooster Church) because of the weathercock on top of the steeple, the candy-pink Danang Cath-}

dal. This riverside hotel has well-maintained, bright rooms and free wi-fi.

Eating VIETNAMESE
Com Chay Chua Tinh Ho (Map p230; 574 D Ong Ich Khiem; dishes from 3000d) Known for the best vegetarian food in town; it’s just inside the entrance gate to the Phap Lam Pagoda.

Com Nieu (Map p230; K254/2 Hoang Dieu; dishes 10,000-40,000d) A local favourite tucked away off a lane, this is the place to try the local speciality hoanh thanh – a wonton-like combination of minced pork and shrimp served fried or steamed.

Au Lac (Map p236; 611 074; 4 6 0 2 9; dishes 25,000-70,000d; lunch & dinner) This stylish restaurant serving tasty Vietnamese dishes has an impressive outdoor dining area and a colourful bar.

Apsara (Map p230; 561 409; www.apsara -danang.com; 222 D Phu Dinh; meals US$15; lunch & dinner) The best dining experience in Danang, Apsara has excellent food, great service, a good wine list and an atmospheric setting – with Cham-influenced décor and live traditional music. The cuisine flirts with Japanese and Chinese, but is mainly Vietnamese, with an emphasis on seafood.

INTERNATIONAL
Bread of Life (Map p230; 893 456; 215 D Phu Dan; cakes/breakfast 10,000/20,000d; breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) A great spot for a Western-style breakfast or a coffee and cake, this little café employs deaf staff and gives a percentage of profits to charity. They also screen movies in English every Wednesday.

Torino (Map p230; 565 124; 283 D Nguyen Chi Thanh; mains 40,000-90,000d; lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This new authentically Italian restaurant serves excellent pasta, pizza and proper espresso, as well as more exotic dishes such as frogs and crocodile. The windowless dining room takes on a better vibe at night when it doubles as a jazz club.

of hotel construction does hold the promise of falling prices in the future. For information on accommodation just across the river at My Khe Beach, see p238.

BUDGET
Minh Travel Hotel (Map p230; 810 667; minhtraymond@yahoo.ca; 105 D Tran Phu; r US$35-9; This tiny place is developing a reputation among super-budget travellers for the friendliness and honesty of its owners and its rock-bottom prices. The cheapest rooms are like prison cells (no air-con and a basic shared bathroom), but the others offer more creature comforts.

Hoa Sen Hotel (Map p230; 829 000; fax 829 001; 119-123 D Hung Vuong; r 200,000d; Close to the train station, this is a tidy budget option, although some rooms are windowless and dark. They’re brightened somewhat by large silk flowers.

Phu An Hotel (Map p230; 825 708; phuanchotel dtn@gmail.com; 29 D Nguyen Van Linh; r US$13-15; Apartment from some bad air-brushed portraits, this spotless new hotel on a busy street is a tasteful and comfortable option.

Bao Ngoc Hotel (Map p230; 817 711; baongoc Hotel@dgk.vn.vn; 48 D Phan Chu Trinh; r US$15-16; With an inexpiably kiwi logo and excessively floral sheets, this inner-city hotel offers good value clean rooms.

Ho Viet Hotel (Map p230; 840 111; fax 840 242; 8 Duc Dai; r US$16-17; This well-priced new joint near the river has attractive, clean rooms.

MIDRANGE
Binh Duong (Map p230; 821 930; fax 827 666; 32-34 D Tran Phu; r US$15-25; Popular with longer-term stayers, the friendly staff at Binh Duong speak excellent English and some of the ample rooms have large corner bathtubs.

Pho Da Nang Pagoda (Map p230; 827 532; www.dapagoda.com; 51 D Ben Yen; r US$15-30; The large Jesus painting and papal crown light fixture in the reception leave no doubt as to the religious affiliation of this establishment, close to the Catholic cathedral. The well-appointed rooms have free internet access, the staff are extremely helpful and there are some lovely views from the higher floors.

Bamboo Green Harbourside (Map p230; 822 722; BambooGreen@dgk.vn.vn; 177 D Tran Phu; r US$25-30; stv US$40; In a good location opposite Danang Cathedral and near the river, many of the rooms have good views and breakfast is included in the prices.

Bamboo Green Riverside Hotel (Map p230; 832 591; www.vitours.com.vn; 68 D Bach Dang; r US$30-50; Even the cheaper rooms have views, bathtubs and silk robes in this impressive place conveniently situated right by the Song Han Bridge.

Elegant Hotel (Map p230; 892 893; elegant@dgk.vn.vn; 22A Bach Dang; r US$25-60, d US$30-65; While the outside is less elegant than it once was, this riverside hotel has well-maintained, bright rooms and free wi-fi.
CENTRAL VIETNAM • Danang

Hana Kim Dinh Restaurant (Map p230; 830 024; 15 D Bach Dang; meals 90,000d) Well located right on the river, this restaurant serves an interesting mix of Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean dishes, along with pizza and pasta.

Phi Lu Chinese Restaurant (Map p236; 611 888; 1-3 D 29; dishes 10,000-35,000d) A popular Chinese restaurant with three branches in Danang, this one has the most character – festooned with red lanterns at night. The food is excellent.

Drinking & Entertainment

Christie’s Cool Spot (Map p230; 824 040; 112 D Tran Phu) The downstairs bar is the place to meet US war veterans and join their debates about whether the Iraq war was even more or less pointless than Vietnam. What brings them back to Vietnam? Without taking a scientific survey, the answer seems to be the women. Christie’s also serves Western comfort food, including pizza and roast chicken.

Tea Café Cung Dinh (Map p230; 562 990; 112 D Yen Bay) It’s amazing what a little mood lighting can do. This garden café set in a dreary car park becomes a fairyland at night, lit by red lanterns at night. The food is excellent. Christie’s also serves Western comfort food, including pizza and roast chicken.

Car & Motorbike

The simplest way to get to the city centre, close enough to reach by xe om in 10 minutes (around 10,000d). A metered taxi to the centre costs about 20,000d.

Cyclo & Xe Om

Danang has plenty of motorbike taxis and cyclo drivers; take the usual caution and be prepared to bargain the fare. Trips around town shouldn’t cost more than 10,000d to 15,000d. Be careful of xe om drivers at night offering to take you to bars/girls – you may find yourself heaved into parting with hundreds of dollars.

TAXI

Both Airport Taxi ( 27 27 27) and VN Taxis ( 52 52 52) provide modern vehicles with air-con and meters.

AROUND DANANG

Nam O Beach

Nam O Beach (Map p236) is on the Bay of Danang about 15km northwest of the city. The small local community supported itself for years by producing firecrackers. Since the ban on firecrackers by the government in 1995, the resourceful locals have recently gone into making nuoc mam instead – and while it’s not as profitable as firecrackers, it’s better than nothing.

There is another local specialty here called goi ca, which is fresh, raw fish fillets marinated in a special sauce and coated in a spicy powder – something like Vietnamese sushi.

At the time of writing there is a complex of buildings behind the beach, being built at the city end of the beach.

Nui Son Tra (Monkey Mountain)

Jutting out into the sea like a giant pair of Mickey Mouse ears, the Son Tra peninsula is crowned by the mountain that the American soldiers called Monkey. Until recently, the military had a military base on its back, but gradually the military has been loosening its grip. An excellent new road winds around the southern edge and several resorts have sprung up – mainly catering to Vietnamese tourists (see below). The large foreigner-friendly Nui Son Tra resort on the isolated eastern side was under construction at the time of research, as was a major bridge linking Tien Sa Port (Cang Tien Sa) with the northern tip of Son Tra.

A memorial near Nui Song Tra’s eastern edge commemorates an unfortunate episode of colonial history. Spanish-led Filipino and French troops attacked Danang in August 1858, ostensibly to end Emperor Tu Duc’s mistreatment of Catholics. The city quickly fell, but the invaders had to contend with cholera, dysentery, scurvy, typhus and mysterious fevers. By the summer of 1859, the number of invaders who had died of illness was 20 times the number of those who had been killed in combat.

Many of the tombs (Map p236; admission free) of the Spanish and French soldiers are below a chapel near Tien Sa Port. The names of the dead are written on the walls. To get here, cross Song Han Bridge and turn left onto D Ngo Quyen, continuing north to the port. The ossuary, a small white building, stands on the right on a low hill, about 500m before the gate of the port and below the chapel.

The sheltered Tien Sa Beach (Map p236), behind the port and the chapel, is quiet and calm, with clear water. It’s good for a swim if you can ignore the litter, and there are great views across to the Hai Van Pass.

SLEEPING & EATING

Bai Rang (Map p236; 0511-971 904; Son Tra; r 150,000d) This place will only appeal to a certain type of backpacker. Unquestionably the real deal, you’ll be sleeping in a thatched roof shack where you may want to check the toilet before you use it. Take a sleeping mat if you choose to stay. There is a ramshackle restaurant and a boat on poles serving as a bar, all set in a placid bay.

Bien Dong Resort (Map p236; 0511-990 179; Son Tra; r 300,000d) Wonderfully isolated, nobody speaks a word of English here. A number of tidy bungalows are dotted around the edge of the jungle. There are two swimming pools for those bored with the idyllic beach, as well as a restaurant and bar. Concrete deer guard the grounds.

Getting There & Away

AIR

During the American War, Danang had one of the busiest airports in the world. Now it sets itself for being the third busiest in Vietnam.

Pacific Airlines (Map p230; 583 583; 35 D Nguyen Van Linh) Daily flights from Danang to HCMC and Hanoi.

Vietnam Airlines (Map p230; 821 130; 15 D Tran Phu; Mon-Fri, 7.15am & 1.30pm Sat & Sun) Connects Danang with Hanoi, HCMC, Pleiku, Buon Ma Thuot, Cam Ranh (Nha Trang) and Quy Nhon.

BUS

The largest Danang intercity bus station (Map p236; 823 265; 33 D Dien Bien Phu; 47 611 412 442) is 3km west from the city centre. A metered taxi to the riverside will cost 50,000d.

Buses leave for all major centres, including Hong Dong (56,000d, five hours, six daily), Hué (40,000d, three hours, six daily), Quy Nhon (65,000d, six hours, 11 daily) and Kon Tum (85,000d, five hours, three daily).

There are three weekly services to Savannakhet (240,000d, 14 hours), crossing the border at Lao Bao. Phone Nguyen Phuoc for bookings (0913-412 442).

Regular buses to Hoi An (8000d, one hour) depart from a local bus station 200m away from the intercity bus station. Foreigners tend to be overcharged, especially if you pick up the bus from street. Check the price before boarding and stand your ground.

With an advance booking, Sinh Café (0510-863 948) open-tour buses will pick up from outside the Cham museum twice a day en route to Hue (US$3, 2½ hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

The simplest way to get to Hoi An (30km) is to hire a car for around US$10 from a local travel agency (see p231), or a motorbike for around US$4 to US$6 from one of the guys on the street corners. For a slightly higher fee you can ask the driver to stop off and wait while you visit the Marble Mountains and China Beach.

You can also reach my Son by motorbike (US$12) or car (US$32), with the option of being dropped off in Hoi An on the way back.

Distances to major destinations from Danang include Hanoi (764km), Hué (108km) and HCMC (972km).

TRAIN

Danang’s train station (823 810; 202 D Haiphong) is served by all Reunification Express trains, with stops including Huế (40,000d, 2½ to four hours, seven daily), Lang Co (13,000d, 1½ to two hours, four daily), Quang Ngai (47,000d, 2½ to four hours, six daily), Tuy Hoa (153,000d, seven to 10 hours, five daily) and Nha Trang (203,000d, 8½ to 12½ hours, seven daily).

The train ride to Huế is one of the best in the country – it’s worth taking as an excursion in itself.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Danang’s airport is just 2km west of the city centre, close enough to reach by xe om in 10 minutes (around 10,000d). A metered taxi to the centre costs about 20,000d.

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 normalize(text)
AROUND DANANG

Marble Mountains
A spectacular sight from the new China Beach coastal road. Marble Mountains (Map p236; admission 15,000d; 7am-5pm) consist of five craggy marble outcrops topped with delicate pagodas. Ironically, the sculptors based around the mountains now use marble shipped in from China, as locals began to realise that at the rate they were using it, there wouldn't be any marble, or any mountains, left to entice visitors.

Each mountain is said to represent a natural element and is named accordingly: Thuy Son (Water), Moc Son (Wood), Hoa Son (Fire), Kim Son (Metal) and Tho Son (Earth). The largest and most famous, Thuy Son, has a number of natural caves in which first Hindu, and later Buddhist, sanctuaries have been built over the centuries.

Of the two paths leading up Thuy Son, the one closer to the beach (at the end of the village) makes for a better circuit. At the top of the staircase is a gate, Ong Chon, which is marked with bullet holes. Behind Ong Chon is Linh Ong Pagoda. Entering the sanctuary, look to the left to see a fantastic figure with a huge tongue. To the right of Linh Ong are monks' quarters and a small orchid garden.

Behind Linh Ong, a path leads left through two short tunnels to several caverns known as Tang Chon Dong. There are several concrete buddhas and blocks of carved stone of Cham origin in these caves. Near one of the altars is a flight of steps leading up to another cave, partially open to the sky, with two seated Buddhas in it.

Immediately to the left as you enter Ong Chon Gate is the main path to the rest of Thuy Son. Stairs off the main pathway lead to Vong Hai Da, a viewpoint for a brilliant panorama of China Beach.

The stone-paved path continues to the right and into a cavern. On the left is Van Thong Cave. Opposite the entrance is a cement Buddha, and behind that is a narrow passage that leads up to a natural chimney open to the sky.

Exit the canyon and pass through a battle-scarred masonry gate. There's a rocky path to the right, which goes to Linh Nham, a tall chimney-shaped cave with a small altar inside. Nearby, another path leads to Hoa Nghiem, a shallow cave with a Buddha inside. If you go down the passageway to the left of the Buddha, you come to cathedral-like Huyen Khoang Cave, lit by an opening to the sky. The entrance to this spectacular chamber is guarded by two administrative mandarins (to the left of the doorway) and two military mandarins (to the right).

Scattered about the cave are Buddhist and Confucian shrines; note the inscriptions carved into the stone walls. On the right a door leads to two stalactites, dripping water that comes from heaven, according to local legend. Actually, only one stalactite drips; the other presumably ran dry when Emperor Tu Duc touched it. During the American War this chamber was used by the VC as a field hospital. Inside is a plaque dedicated to the Women's Artillery Group, which destroyed 19 US aircraft from a base below the mountains in 1972.

Just to the left of the masonry gate is Tam Thai Tu, a pagoda restored by Emperor Minh Mang in 1826. A path heading obliquely to the right goes to the monks' residence, beyond which are two shrines. From there a red dirt path leads to five small pagodas. Before you arrive at the monks' residence, stairs on the left-hand side of the path lead to Vong Giang Dai, which offers a fantastic 180-degree view of the other Marble Mountains and the surrounding countryside. To get to the stairway follow the path straight on from the gate.

A torch (flashlight) is handy for exploring the caves. Local children have learned that foreigner buy souvenirs and leave tips for unsolicited guided tours, so you won't begin your visit alone. And watch your wallets! The local government adopted a regulation that the children cannot take tips, but can sell souvenirs. This seems counterproductive; most travellers would rather tip the kids for the guided tours than buy the sorry souvenirs on offer. In general, the kids are good-natured, if extremely persistent, and some of the caves are difficult to find without their assistance.

Local buses between Danang and Ho An (tickets 8000d) can drop you at Marble Mountains, 19km north of Ho An.

Non Nuoc Hamlet
Non Nuoc Hamlet is on the southern side of Thuy Son and is a few hundred metres west of Non Nuoc Beach. The marble carvings made here would make great gifts if they didn't weigh so much. It's fun to watch the carving at work, and there are some tiny carved figures that make nice presents.

The town has been spruced up for tourism. During the war, the Americans referred to the shantytown near here as 'Dogpatch', after a derelict town in the comic strip L'il Abner. Most of the residents living here at the time were refugees fleeing the fighting in the surrounding countryside.

China Beach
Thanks to the eponymous 1980s TV series, China Beach will forever be associated with pretty young military nurses complaining about their love lives to the accompaniment of the Rolling Stones' Paint It Black. During the war the Americans used the name to refer to the beautiful 30km sweep of fine white sand that starts at Monkey Mountain and finishes near Ho An, with the Marble Mountains near its centre. The part they were most familiar with was the area close to Danang where soldiers stationed all over the country would be sent for some R&R. For some, a picnic on the beach was their last meal before their return to combat by helicopter.

The Vietnamese call sections of the beach by different names, including My Khe, My An, Non Nuoc and Cua Dai. In the last decade a clever entrepreneur cashing in on the TV series started calling the area in front of his hotel China Beach – although it's considerably south of where the Americans hung out.

While My Khe is now basically a suburb of Danang and Cua Dai is widely considered Ho An's beach, much of the area in between
is gorgeously undeveloped. Not for long, however: a major four-lane dual carriageway has just been built along the entire length, with the beginnings of side roads starting and then abruptly stopping in the sand after a few metres. As you drive through small towns you can see where houses have been cut in half to wash the sand.

The beachfront land has been divided into parcels with the government actively encouraging resort development. This could easily turn into another Mui Ne (see p300), with the open sandy vista hidden by the walls of luxury resorts. There are already a number of exclusive resorts at Cua Dai; quite how developers would fill another 30 is anyone’s guess. Like Mui Ne, it may result in prices falling in the future.

In December 1992 China Beach was the site of the first international surfing competition in Vietnam. The surf can be very good from around mid-September to December, particularly in the morning when wind conditions are right.

**MY KHE BEACH**

Just across the Song Han Bridge (10,000d by xe om), My Khe is fast becoming Danang’s easternmost suburb. In the early morning and evening the beach fills up with city-dwellers doing Tai Chi. After dark the deckchairs are more in demand than during the day, with young couples escaping crowded family homes for a starlit canoodle. Offshore the waves spout dolphins, and a huge boat-shaped bar-restaurant. Active types can hire surfboards, windsurfers and jet skis, and there’s a beach volleyball court set up.

**Sleeping**

The main beachside hotels are all looking a little shabby, but a couple of new entrants in the surrounding streets offer better value.

**Blue Sea Hotel** (Map p236; 0511-942 426; blue.sea@hotman.vn; 235 D Nguyen Van Thao; r US$20-40; 24 ) This friendly mid-sized hotel offers new and spotless rooms with satellite TV, fridges and bathtubs. Take the lane beside the My Khe Hotel and turn left at the 10,000d sign.

**Golden Sea Hotel** (Map p236; 0511-936 666; goldensea@hotman.vn; 826-29 D Pham Van Dong; r US$25-30, ste US$50; 24 27 ) Well positioned halfway between the city and beach, the large new Golden Sea Hotel is in walking distance of both. Breakfast and internet access are provided free, and the suites have a steam room attached.

**Eating & Drinking**

My Khe Beach is rightly known for its excellent seafood restaurants.

**My Hanh** (Map p236; 0511-831 494; 18 D Du Lich Son Tra; mains 80,000d; 24 31  lunch & dinner) My Khe Beach’s most famous restaurant, it serves a wide selection of fish, shrimp, squid, eel and crab dishes on its seaside terrace.

**Van Xuan** (Map p236; 0511-914 234; 233A D Nguyen Van Thao; dishes 18,000-100,000d; 24 lunch & dinner) An upmarket addition, Van Xuan has large tanks of live fish, lobsters and crocodiles. The owner once lived in Prague, and the restaurant brews its own Czech-style Five Mountains Beer.

Also worth trying is **Phuoc My** (Map p236; 0511-831 962; 6 Du Lich Son Tra; meals 25,000-100,000d; 24 lunch & dinner) – a giggie-inducing name when pronounced correctly.

**MY AN & NON NUOC BEACHES**

The central section of China Beach is the least developed, with only a few hamlets and isolated resorts. It also offers the best surfing and diving.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Hoa’s Place** (Map p236; 0511-969 216; My An Beach; hoa@hsplace@hotmail.com; r US$5) This joint is small-scale, low key and laid back. Hoa and his wife ensure their home is your home. Good food and cheap beer (6000d) make it a smart lunch stop for passers-by. Take the second turning on the left past Furama heading south.

**Sandy Beach Resort** (Map p236; 0511-836 216; www.sandybeachdanang.com; 255 D Huyen Tran Cong Chua, Non Nuoc Beach; s US$85-214, d US$90-219, bungalow US$120-231, villa US$160-375; 24 31 ) An older resort given a make-over, Sandy Beach has intriguing echoes of 1970s socialist architecture, but it’s clean and smart with two swimming pools, three bars and two restaurants. It has a wonderful location – just south of the Marble Mountains – on an isolated stretch of sand patrolled by its own lifeguards. Wi-fi internet is free.

**furama Danang**

(Map p236; 0511-847 888; www.furamavietnam.com; 6B D Ho Xuan Huong, My An Beach; s US$207-299, d US$230-322, ste US$575-690; 24 31 27). This is Danang’s luxury hotel. In fact, for a long time it was Vietnam’s luxury hotel. Perched on a private slice of China Beach, this lavish resort features a diving facility, a golf driving range, a gym and two pools, one with a waterfall. Rooms have opulent bathrooms and the finest five-star trim. Day-use of the grounds, pools and fitness centre is US$12 for nonguests. The restaurant is excellent although pricy; expect an extra US$14 charge for breakfast.

**CUA DAI BEACH**

The fine sands of palm-lined Cua Dai Beach are popular at weekends, but can be deserted at other times. Safe swimming is usually only possible between April and October, but it’s nice to walk or just hang out here. During the full moon, people wander around until late at night. Fresh seafood and refreshments are sold at a line of restaurants along the beachfront, all of which have deckchairs for hire.

Cua Dai Beach is 5km east of Hoi An on D Cua Dai.

**Activities**

Cua Dai is a good base for scuba divers exploring the nearby Cu Lao Cham Marine Park, 25 minutes away by speedboat (see p261). Vietnam’s longest-standing and best-respected dive company, Rainbow Divers ([0570-927 678](#); www.divevietnam.com) has a base at Cua Dai Beach, the Hoi An Beach Resort. For certified divers, two dives cost US$75. Training is available for beginners.

Cua Dai Beach is also the home of Hoian Eco Tour ([0510-927 808](#); www.hoianecotour.com; 7 D Cua Dai Beach, tours US$55-50), which offers a range of tours giving an insight into traditional Vietnamese life, including river and sea fishing.

**Sleeping**

Cua Dai is home to some of the priciest resorts in Vietnam. If you’re after a bargain, head for Hoi An.

**Victoria Hoi An Resort** ([0510-927 040](#); www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r US$121-202, ste US$242; 24 31 ). Sitting on a huge slice of beach, this resort boasts all the stylish facilities you’d expect for the price, including a large pool, a separate children’s pool and free wi-fi. Low-season discounts are usually available.

**Palm Garden Resort** ([0510-927 927](#); www.palm gardenresort.com; D Lac Long Quan; r US$173-225, bungalow US$249-282, ste US$338; 24 31 ). Another massive, super-flash new resort taking up a big chunk of beautiful beachfront, this one has an immense pool with a fountain and spouting dolphins, and a huge boat-shaped bar-restaurant. Active types can hire surfboards, windsurfers and jet skis, and there’s a beach volleyball court set up.

**Luxury junkies should keep an eye out for the Nam Hai ([0510-940 000](#); www.sghotels.com; villas US$550-2300; 24 31 ). Not open at the time of research, it promises an exquisitely designed luxury village of villas, each with their own private pool.

**HOI AN**

([0510](#) / pop. 79,600)

A highlight of any trip to Vietnam, Hoi An is a town oozing charm and history, having largely escaped the destruction of successive wars. Once a sleepy riverside village, it’s now quite lively, with a touristy town bordering from hotels, restaurants, bars, tailors and souvenir shops dominating the old centre. Despite this air of irreality, Hoi An’s charm is pervasive.

The local People’s Committee periodically clamps down on touts, and while this doesn’t mean a completely hassle-free visit, a stroll down the street is usually more relaxed here than in Hué or Nha Trang. Hoi An is pedestrian-friendly: the Old Town is closed to cars and the distances from the hotels to the centre are walkable. It’s a great place to hire a bike.

Known as Faifo to Western traders, from the 17th to 19th centuries it was one of Southeast Asia’s major international ports. Vietnamese ships and sailors based here sailed all around Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. Perhaps more than any other place in Vietnam, Hoi An retains a sense of history that envelops you as you explore it. This is especially true on ‘Hoi An Legendary Night’. Every month on the full moon, motorbikes and buggies are banned from the Old Town, which is transformed into a magical land of silk lanterns, traditional food, song and dance, and games in the streets.
Every year during the rainy season, particularly in October and November, Hoi An has problems with flooding, especially in areas close to the waterfront. The greatest flood ever recorded in Hoi An took place in 1964, when the water reached all the way up to the roof beams of the houses. In late 2006 the town bore the brunt of the worst typhoon in 50 years, although at the time of research repairs were well in hand.

There’s plenty to do in Hoi An. Emphatically the most enchanting place along the coast, this is one spot worth lingering in.

### History

Recently excavated ceramic fragments from 2200 years ago constitute the earliest evidence of human habitation in the Hoi An area. They are thought to belong to the late-Iron Age Sa Huynh civilization, which is related to the Dong Son culture of northern Vietnam.

From the 2nd to the 10th centuries, this was a busy seaport of the Champa kingdom (see p264). Persian and Arab documents from the latter part of the period mention Hoi An as a provisions stop. Archaeologists have uncovered the foundations of numerous Cham towers around Hoi An: the bricks and stones were reused by Vietnamese settlers.

In 1307 the Cham king married the daughter of a monarch of the Tran dynasty and presented Quang Nam province to the Vietnamese as a gift. After his death, his successor refused to recognise the deal and fighting broke out: for the next century chaos reigned. By the 15th century peace had been restored, allowing normal commerce to resume. During the next four centuries Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, French, British and American ships came to Hoi An to purchase high-grade silk (for which the area is famous), fabrics, paper, porcelain, tea, sugar, molasses, areca nuts, pepper, Chinese medicines, elephant tusks, beeswax, mother-of-pearl, lacquer, sulphur and lead.

The Chinese and Japanese traders sailed south in the spring, driven by winds from the northeast. They would stay in Hoi An until...
the summer, when southerly winds would blow them home. During their four-month sojourn in Hoi An, the merchants rented waterfront houses for use as warehouses and living quarters. Some traders began leaving full-time agents in Hoi An to take care of off-season business affairs. This is how foreign colonies got started, although the Japanese ceased coming to Hoi An after 1637, when the Japanese government forbade all contact with the outside world.

Hoi An was the site of the first Chinese settlement in southern Vietnam. The town’s Chinese hoi quan (congregational assembly halls) still play a special role among southern Vietnam’s ethnic Chinese, some of whom come to Hoi An from all over the region to participate in congregation-wide celebrations. Today 1300 of Hoi An’s population of 75,800 are ethnic Chinese. Relations between ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese in Hoi An are excellent, partly because the Chinese have become assimilated to the point where they even speak Vietnamese among themselves.

This was also the first place in Vietnam to be exposed to Christianity. Among the 17th-century missionary visitors was the French priest Alexandre de Rhodes, who devised the Latin-based quốc ngữ script for the Vietnamese language.

Hoi An was almost completely destroyed during the Tây Sơn Rebellion. It was rebuilt and continued to serve as an important port for foreign trade until the late 19th century, when the Thu Bon River (Cai River), which links Hoi An with the sea, silted up and became too shallow for navigation. During this period Danang (Tourane) began to eclipse Hoi An as a port and centre of commerce. In 1916 a rail line linking Danang with Hoi An was destroyed in a terrible storm; it was never rebuilt.

Under French rule Hoi An served as an administrative centre. During the American War the city, with the cooperation of both sides, remained almost completely undamaged.

Orientation
The Thu Bon River forms the southern edge of the Old Town. Bridges link this to the An Hoi Peninsula and Cam Nam Island. The newer part of town stretches to the north. The road to Cua Dai Beach here. Many streets have changed names and/or been renumbered. In some cases the old and new numbers sit side by side on buildings.

Information
BOOKSHOPS
Khai Tri (52 B Le Lai) Sells secondhand books and dopey copies.
EMERGENCY
Hoi An Police Station (861 204; 84 D Hoang Dieu)
INTERNET ACCESS
Min’s Computer (914 323; 125 B Nguyen Duy Hieu; per hr 4000d) Access is slow throughout Hoi An, but this is as good as any.
MEDICAL SERVICES
Dr Ho Huu Phuoc Practice (867 419; 74 B Le Lai; 11am-12.30pm & 5-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-12.30pm Sat & Sun) A local doctor who speaks English.
Hoi An Hospital (861 364; 4 D Tran Hung Dao) If it’s anything serious, make for Danang.
MONEY
Incombank (861 261; 4 Hoang Dieu) This branch and another at 9 D Le Loi both change cash and travellers cheques, offer Visa advances and have ATMs.
POST
Main post office (861 480; 6 D Tran Hung Dao)
TRAVEL AGENCIES
Competition is pretty fierce, so for expensive or complicated arrangements it’s probably worth checking out a few options and negotiating.
Hoi An Old Town Booth (D Hoang Dieu) A handy spot to pick up an Old Town ticket.
Nga (863 485; lenqaz2zus@yahoo.com; 22 D Phan Boi Chau) Handles plane, train and open-tour bus bookings, tours to My Son and Cham Island, boat trips and car rentals.
Sinh Café (863 948; www.sinhcafevn.com; 188 D Phan Đình Phùng) Books reputable open-tour buses.
Tourist Service Office (862 952; 78 B Le Lai) Also books good open-tour buses.
Dangers & Annoyances
Generally speaking, Hoi An is one of the safer towns in Vietnam, but there have been stories of late-night bag-snatching in the poorly lit market area of town. We have also heard accounts of women being followed to their hotels and assaulted on very rare occasions. If you are a lone female, try and make sure you walk home with somebody. In the very unlikely event that something like this happens, shout and scream as Hoi An is a very quiet town by night.

A worrying trend here as in other parts of Vietnam is the use of children to sell trinkets, postcards and newspapers. Don’t be fooled into thinking that the kids actually see the money themselves. One can only hope that if tourists stop buying from the children, their controllers will stop using them – perhaps freeing them to pursue an education.

Sights
Now a Unesco World Heritage site, Hoi An Old Town (www.hoiannonworldheritage.org; entrance ticket 75,000d) is governed by preservation laws that are well up to speed. Several buildings of historical and cultural significance are open for public viewing, a number of streets in the centre of town are off-limits to cars, and building alterations and height restrictions are well enforced. If only Hanoi would follow suit in its historic Old Quarter.

The admission fee goes towards funding this conservation work. This ticket gives you a complicated choice of heritage attractions to visit. You can attend a traditional music show at the handicraft workshop, and one of the four following types of attractions: museums; assembly halls; old houses; and ‘other’. If you want to visit additional attractions, then it is necessary to buy another ticket; there are ticket offices dotted around the centre.

But for those who only want to buy one ticket, what are the best options? The most interesting museum is that of Trading Ceramics, mainly for the building it’s housed in. Among the assembly halls, the Fujian folk probably have the edge. When it comes to old houses, the Tran Family Chapel offers an interesting and informative tour. Finally there is that obscure ‘other’ category: the shrine in the Japanese Bridge ticket just gets you into a small shrine that is second-best to the bridge itself, which you can enjoy free.

The system doesn’t seem to be too well monitored, but hopefully the fees do get collected and end up as part of the restoration and preservation fund. Not all of Hoi An’s old houses and assembly halls require a ticket, and there’s certainly nothing to stop anybody from wandering the old streets to admire the houses.

Despite the number of tourists who come to Hoi An, it is still a conservative town, and visitors should dress modestly when visiting the sites.

Japanese Covered Bridge
This famed bridge (Cầu Nhật Bản) connects D Trấn Phú with D Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. The first bridge on this site was constructed in the 1590s. It was built by the Japanese community of Hoi An in order to link them with the Chinese quarters across the stream.

The Japanese Covered Bridge is very solidly constructed; the original builders were concerned about the threat of earthquakes. Over the centuries the ornamentation has remained relatively faithful to the original Japanese design. Its understatement contrasts greatly with the Vietnamese and Chinese penchant for wild decoration. The French flattened out the roadway to make it suitable for their motor vehicles, but the original arched shape was restored during major renovation work in 1986.

Built into the northern side of the bridge is a small temple (D vùng adrems) found Old Town ticket). The writing over its door is the name given to the bridge in 1719 to replace the name meaning Japanese Covered Bridge. However the new name, Lai Vien Kieu (Bridge for Passers-by from Afar), never quite caught on.

According to legend, there once lived an enormous monster called Cu, who had its head in India, its tail in Japan and its body in Vietnam. Whenever the monster moved, terrible disasters such as floods and earthquakes befell Vietnam. This bridge was built on the monster’s weakest point and killed it, but the people of Hoi An took pity on the slain monster and built this temple to pray for its soul.

The entrances of the bridge are guarded by a pair of monkeys on one side and a pair of dogs on the other. According to one story, these animals were popularly revered because many of Japan’s emperors were born in years of the dog and the monkey. Another tale says that construction of the bridge started in the year of the monkey and was finished in the year of the dog.

The stela, listing all the Vietnamese and Chinese contributors to a subsequent restoration of the bridge, are written in chu nho (Chinese characters) – the nom script had not yet become popular in these parts.

Museums
Showcasing a collection of blue and white ceramics of the Dai Viet period, the Museum of Trading Ceramics (80 D Trấn Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) occupies a simply restored house. The admission fee goes towards funding this conservation work. This ticket gives you a complicated choice of heritage attractions to visit. You can attend a traditional music show at the handicraft workshop, and one of the four following types of attractions: museums; assembly halls; old houses; and ‘other’. If you want to visit additional attractions, then it is necessary to buy another ticket; there are ticket offices dotted around the centre. But for those who only want to buy one ticket, what are the best options? The most interesting museum is that of Trading Ceramics, mainly for the building it’s housed in. Among the assembly halls, the Fujian folk probably have the edge. When it comes to old houses, the Tran Family Chapel offers an interesting and informative tour. Finally there is that obscure ‘other’ category: the shrine in the Japanese Bridge ticket just gets you into a small shrine that is second-best to the bridge itself, which you can enjoy free.

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This famed bridge (Cầu Nhật Bản) connects D Trấn Phú with D Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. The first bridge on this site was constructed in the 1590s. It was built by the Japanese community of Hoi An in order to link them with the Chinese quarters across the stream.

The Japanese Covered Bridge is very solidly constructed; the original builders were concerned about the threat of earthquakes. Over the centuries the ornamentation has remained relatively faithful to the original Japanese design. Its understatement contrasts greatly with the Vietnamese and Chinese penchant for wild decoration. The French flattened out the roadway to make it suitable for their motor vehicles, but the original arched shape was restored during major renovation work in 1986.

Built into the northern side of the bridge is a small temple (D vùng adrems) found Old Town ticket). The writing over its door is the name given to the bridge in 1719 to replace the name meaning Japanese Covered Bridge. However the new name, Lai Vien Kieu (Bridge for Passers-by from Afar), never quite caught on.

According to legend, there once lived an enormous monster called Cu, who had its head in India, its tail in Japan and its body in Vietnam. Whenever the monster moved, terrible disasters such as floods and earthquakes befell Vietnam. This bridge was built on the monster’s weakest point and killed it, but the people of Hoi An took pity on the slain monster and built this temple to pray for its soul.

The entrances of the bridge are guarded by a pair of monkeys on one side and a pair of dogs on the other. According to one story, these animals were popularly revered because many of Japan’s emperors were born in years of the dog and the monkey. Another tale says that construction of the bridge started in the year of the monkey and was finished in the year of the dog.

The stela, listing all the Vietnamese and Chinese contributors to a subsequent restoration of the bridge, are written in chu nho (Chinese characters) – the nom script had not yet become popular in these parts.

Museums
Showcasing a collection of blue and white ceramics of the Dai Viet period, the Museum of Trading Ceramics (80 D Trấn Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) occupies a simply restored house.
made of dark wood. In particular, check out the great ceramic mosaic that’s set above the pond in the inner courtyard.

Housed in the Quan Am Pagoda, the Hoi An Museum of History & Culture (7 D Nguyen Hue; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 8am-5pm) has a small collection of bronze temple bells, gongs and Cham artefacts.

Artefacts from the early Dong Son civilisation of Sa Huynh are displayed downstairs at the Museum of Sa Huynh Culture & Museum of the Revolution (149 D Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 8am-5pm). Upstairs, the Revolution museum has the usual collection of local photos and mementos of the last two wars, including a boat used to transport cadres. It would be more accessible if full English captions were provided.

Assembly Halls

Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation
Founded as a place to hold community meetings, this assembly hall (Phuc Kien; opposite 35 D Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) was later transformed into a temple for the worship of Thien Hau, a deity from Fujian province. The triple gate to the complex was built in 1975.

The mural on the right-hand wall near the entrance to the main hall depicts Thien Hau, her way lit by lantern light as she crosses a stormy sea to rescue a foundership. On the wall opposite is a mural of the heads of the six Fujian families who fled from China to Hoi An in the 17th century, following the overthrow of the Ming dynasty.

The penultimate chamber contains a statue of Thien Hau. To either side of the entrance stand red-skinned Thien Ly Nhan and green-skinned Thien Ly Nhan. When either sees or hears sailors in distress, they inform Thien Hau, who sets out to effect a rescue. The replica of a Chinese boat along the right-hand wall is 1:20 scale.

The central altar in the last chamber contains seated figures of the heads of the six Fujian families. The smaller figures below them represent their successors as clan leaders. Behind the altar on the left is the God of Prosperity. On the right are three fairies and smaller figures representing the 12 by nu (souk) of which the elders and those newborns a different skill necessary for the first year of life: smiling, sucking, lying on their stomachs and so forth. Childless couples often come here to pray for offspring. The three groups of figures in this chamber represent the elements most central to Chinese life: ancestors, children and financial wellbeing.

The middle altar of the room to the right of the courtyard commemorates deceased leaders of the Fujian congregation. On either side are lists of contributors – women on the left and men on the right. The wall panels represent the four seasons.

The Fujian assembly hall is fairly well lit and can be visited after dark. Shoes should be removed upon mounting the platform just past the naves.

Assembly Hall of the Cantonese Chinese Congregation
Founded in 1786, this assembly hall (176 D Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 8am-5pm) has a main altar that is dedicated to Quan Cong (see p246). Note the long-handled brass fans to either side of the altar. The lintel and door posts of the main entrance and a number of the columns supporting the roof are made of single blocks of granite. The other columns were carved out of the durable wood of the jackfruits. There are intricate carvings on the wooden beams that support the roof in front of the main entrance.

Assembly Hall of the Chaozhou Chinese Congregation
The Chaozhou Chinese in Hoi An built their congregational hall (Trieu Chau; opposite 157 D Nguyen Duy Hieu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 8am-5pm) in 1776. Some outstanding woodcarvings are on the beams, walls and altar. On the doors in front of the altar are carvings of two Chinese girls wearing their hair in a Japanese style.

Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall
Founded in 1773, the Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall (Chua Ba; 361 935; 64 Tran Phu; admission free) was used by Fujian, Cantonese, Hainan, Chaozhou and Hakka congregations in Hoi An. The pavilions off the main courtyard incorporate elements of 19th-century French architecture.

Assembly Hall of the Hainan Chinese Congregation
Built in 1851, this assembly hall (10 D Tran Phu; admission free; 8am-5pm) is a memorial to 108 merchants from Hainan Island who were mistreated for pirates and killed in Quang Nam province during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc. The elaborate dais contains plaques to their memory. In front of the central altar is a fine gilded woodcarving of Chinese court life.

Old Houses

Tan Ky House
Built two centuries ago as the home of a well-to-do ethnic-Vietnamese merchant, Tan Ky House is a memorial to 108 ancestors’ stone tablets – featuring chiseled Chinese characters setting out the dates of birth and death – along with some small personal effects. On the anniversary of each family member’s death, their box is opened, incense is burned and food is offered. Nowadays photographs have replaced the stone tablets.

There’s a museum and souvenir shop at the back of the chapel. The small garden behind is where the placenta of newborn families was buried – the practice is meant to prevent fighting between the children.

Quang Thang House
This private house (77 Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 7am-5pm) is three centuries old and has been in the family for six generations, having been built by an ancestor who was a Chinese captain. Again, the architecture includes Japanese and Chinese elements. There is a small personal effects. On the anniversary of each family member’s death, their box is opened, incense is burned and food is offered. Nowadays photographs have replaced the stone tablets.

Phung Hung Old House
In a lane full of beautiful buildings, this old house (4 D Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; 8am-7pm) stands out. It’s still a family home, having housed eight generations over 226 years. At present it showcases hand embroidery and souvenirs; wander through and enjoy the ambience.
Tran Duong House
There’s a whole city block of colonnaded French-colonial buildings on Đ Phan Boi Chau, between Nos 22 and 73, among them the 19th-century Tran Duong House (25 Đ Phan Boi Chau; admission free, donations welcome; 9am-6pm). Mr Duong, a charming retired mathematics teacher, speaks English and French, and is happy to explain the history of his 62m-long house that has been in his family for six generations. The large wooden table in the front room is the family bed.

Diep Dong Nguyen House
Built for a wealthy Chinese merchant in the late 19th century is Diep Dong Nguyen House (38 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; admission free; 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm). The front room on the ground floor was once a dispensary for thuoac bac (Chinese medicine); the medicines were stored in the glass-enclosed cases lining the walls. The owner’s private collection of antiques – which includes photographs, porcelain and furniture – is on display upstairs. Two of the chairs were once lent by the family to Emperor Bao Dai.

Old House at 103 Đ Tran Phu
The wooden frontage and shutters make a good photographic backdrop to this eclectic shop (103 Đ Tran Phu; admission free), where women make silk lanterns.

TEMPLES & PAGODAS
Quan Cong Temple
Founded in 1653, Quan Cong Temple (Chua Ong; 24 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) is dedicated to Quan Cong – a highly esteemed Chinese general who is worshipped as a symbol of loyalty, sincerity, integrity and justice. His partially gilt statue, made of papier-maché on a wooden frame, is in the central altar at the back of the sanctuary. On the left is a statue of General Chau Xuong, one of Quan Cong’s guardians, striking a tough-guy pose. On the right is the rather camp and plump administrative mandarin Quan Binh. The life-size white horse recalls a mount ridden by Quan Cong, until he was given a red horse of extraordinary endurance, representations of which are common in Chinese pagodas.

Check out the carp-shaped rain spouts on the roof surrounding the courtyard. The carp is a symbol of patience in Chinese mythology and is popular in Hoi An.

Shoes should be removed when mounting the platform in front of the statue of Quan Cong.

Chuc Thanh Pagoda
Founded in 1454 by Minh Hai, a Buddhist monk from China, Chuc Thanh Pagoda (Chua Ong) was once a dispensary for the local Chinese. Its claim to fame is that it’s the only place you’re able to draw water from a well in the middle of the square in shape. Its claim to fame is that it’s the oldest pagoda in Hoi An. Among the antique ritual objects still in use are several bells, a stone gong that is two centuries old and a carp-shaped wooden gong said to be even older.

In the main sanctuary the gilt Chinese characters inscribed on a red roof beam give details of the pagoda’s construction. An A Di Da Buddha flanked by two Thích Ca Buddhas sits under a wooden canopy on the central dais. In front of them is a statue of a boyhood Thích Ca flanked by his servants.

To get to Chuc Thanh Pagoda, go north all the way to the end of Đ Nguyen Truong To and turn left. Follow the sandy path for 500m.

Phuoc Lam Pagoda
Phuoc Lam Pagoda (Thôn 2A, Cam Hâ; 8am-6pm) was founded in the mid-17th century. The head monk at the end of that century was An Thiem, a Vietnamese prodigy who became a monk at the age of eight. When he was 18, the king drafted An Thiem’s brothers into his army to put down a rebellion. An Thiem volunteered to take the places of the other men in his family and eventually rose to the rank of general. After the war he returned to monkhood, but felt guilty about the many people he had slain. To atone for his sins, he volunteered to clean the Hoi An Market for 20 years. When that time was up, he was asked to come to Phuoc Lam Pagoda as head monk.

To reach the pagoda, continue past Chuc Thanh Pagoda for 400m. The path passes an obelisk that was erected over the tomb of 13 ethnic Chinese, who had been decapitated by the Japanese during WWII for resistance activities.

Other Temples & Pagodas
Serving the local community, the Cao Dai pagoda (88 Đ Huong Vuong), near the bus station, is surrounded by peaceful gardens.

The Phac Hat Pagoda (673 Hai Ba Trung) has a colourful façade of ceramics and murals and is an active place of worship.

The less ornate and newish Cam Pho Temple (52 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; 8am-5pm) is notable mainly for its ceramic dragon roof line.

HANDICRAFT WORKSHOP
Housed in the 200-year-old trading house of a Chinese merchant, the Handicraft Workshop (910 216; 9 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) delivers what it promises – in the back section you can watch artisans making silk lanterns and taking part in traditional crafts like embroidery. It’s a good place to pick up souvenirs. Fascinating cultural performances are held in the front hall twice daily (10.15am and 3.15pm), featuring traditional singers, dancers and musicians.

BA LE WELL
Said to date from Cham times, this well is square in shape. Its claim to fame is that it’s the only place you’re able to draw water from if you’re to make authentic cao lau, a Hoi An specialty (see p250). You’re likely to see elderly people making their daily pilgrimage to fill metal pots here. To find it, turn down the alley opposite 35 Đ Phan Chu Trinh and take the second laneway to the right.

Hoi An Walking Tour
This tasty little trail takes you past Hoi An’s main sights in a half-day amble. If you want to venture inside some of the buildings, call into the Tourist Service Office (p242) to purchase your Hoi An Old Town ticket before you set off.

Start at the Tran Family Chapel (1; p245). Head south on Đ Le Loi and turn left at the next junction onto Đ Tran Phu. On your right you’ll find Quan Thang House (2; p245) and a little further on the left, the Museum of Trading Ceramics (3; p243). Continuing along Đ Tran Phu, there is a cluster of interesting buildings on the left side of the road, including the Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall (4; p244) and the Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation (5; p244).

Keep heading east and at the next junction take a short detour north on Đ Nguyen Hue to the Hoi An Museum of History & Culture (6; p244). Back on Tran Phu you’ll see the Quan Cong Temple (7; opposite). Still walking east on Đ Tran Phu, the Assembly Hall of the Hainan Chinese Congregation (8; p244) is on the left. Cross the next junction and the road becomes Đ Nguyen Duy Hier. On the left is the Assembly Hall of the Chaozhou Chinese Congregation (9; p244).
Take the second right and turn right again onto Đ Phan Boi Chau. There is a whole city block of colonnaded French buildings here between Nos 22 and 73, among them the 19th-century Tran Duong House (10; p246). Wander along Đ Phan Boi Chau, turning right just past the market and then left into Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc and soak up the ambience of this street. On the left is the Handicraft Workshop (11; p247) - if you time it correctly you might be able to catch a cultural performance. Just past the next street is the intriguingly named Hoi An Department of Managing & Gathering Swallow’s Nests (12; 53 Nguyen Thai Hoc). The nests are gathered from Cham Island twice a year; if you’re lucky you’ll be able to watch worker’s sorting their precious harvest here (see p295).

Turn right onto Đ Le Loi, then left onto Đ Tran Phu. Almost immediately on the left is the Old House at 103 Trần Phu (13; p246). Keep heading west and you’ll pass the Assembly Hall of the Cantonese Chinese Congregation (14; p244). A little further along on the left is the Museum of Sa Huynh Culture & Museum of the Revolution (15; p244). Beyond the museum is the famed Japanese Covered Bridge (16; p243), which connects Đ Tran Phu with Đ Nguyễn Thi Minh Khai. Continue westward and keep an eye out for Phung Hung Old House (17; p245). Also check out Cam Pho Temple (18; p247).

From here either retrace your steps or continue on to the Cao Dai Pagoda (19; p247). Then, back across the Japanese bridge, turn right and follow the road onto Đ Nguyễn Thái Hoc, where you’ll see the Tan Ky House (20; p245). On the left before the next junction is the Diep Dong Nguyen House (21; p246). Now you can settle down for a long, cool drink at one of the nearby bars.

**Activities**
For eco-tours and swimming at Cua Dai Beach to the east, see p239.

**COOKING COURSES**
For many visitors to Vietnam the food is a highlight and eating it a serious activity in itself. Hoi An is Foodie Heaven, and budding gourmands who want to take a step further into Vietnamese cuisine will find ample opportunity here. Many of the popular eateries offer cooking classes, and the best bit is that you then get to sit down and enjoy the fruits of your labour.

One of the best classes is offered by Hai Scout Café (see p251) at its Red Bridge Cooking School (933 222; www.redbridgehoian.com). Starting out with a trip to the market, you then cruise down the river to this relaxing retreat about 4km from Hoi An. The lesson includes a tour of the herb garden, making rice paper, several local specialities and some decorative flourishes – although it’s hard to imagine how your dinner party guests back home will react to tomatoes morphed into roses and lotus flowers. The class costs 235,000d per person; it starts at 8.45am and finishes at 1pm. You’re given print-outs of the recipes to try at home.

More informal classes can be found at Restaurant Café 96 (50,000d per person; see p251), Green Moss (choose off the menu and pay a US$2 supplement; see p251) and Café des Amis (US$20; see p251).

**DIVING**
Rainbow Divers (911 123; www.divevietnam.com; 98 Đ Le Loi) have an office in the Old Town, where you can book dives at Cu Lao Cham Marine Park (p261).

**Sleeping**
Hoi An has the best-value accommodation in Vietnam, and quite possibly the whole of Asia. Don’t be surprised to find a stylish air-conditioned room in a brand-new hotel with free breakfast and a swimming pool for less than US$15. Some places even throw in complimentary bicycles for guests’ use.

A building boom has resulted in a glut of options, with 1000 beds added in a six-month period in 2003 alone. Still, if you have your heart set on a particular hotel, you should probably book ahead at busy times.

Considering how small and walkable Hoi An is, there should be no great compulsion to find a place in the heart of the Old Town. In addition, the older hotels in the centre tend to charge the same as the quieter and more spacious ones on the edge, but lack the extras like swimming pools. There’s a cluster of new hotels with rear views over rice paddies around Đ Ba Trieu to the north, and several more on the road to the beach (Đ Cua Dai) – although these latter are a good 10-minute walk from the action. Many of the new hotels are second or third incarnations of old favourites, with innovative names like II and III. The most upmarket options are on the riverbank or at nearby Cua Dai Beach (see p239).

Prices listed here are standard rates. Many places advertise two rates for rooms: with or without breakfast. It was common for rates to rise during the peak December and January period, but now with such oversupply it is generally no longer the case. Outside of these times you may be able to negotiate a considerable discount.

**BUDGET**
Hoi Pho Hotel (916 182; hoiphohotel@yahoo.com; 62 Đ Hai Ba Trưng; US$7; ) This modest, family-owned minihotel offers straightforward value for money, with clean rooms and attentive service.

Minh A Ancient Lodging House (861 368; 2 Đ Nguyễn Thai Hoc; US$8) Brimming with character, this splendid 180-year-old traditional wooden home is a cross between a B&B and a museum – offering an intriguing insight into Old Town family life. There’s an ornate ancestor altar in the front room, a well in the courtyard behind and three guest rooms upstairs.

Huy Hoang 1 Hotel (861 453; kshuyhoang1@nguyen.vn; 73 Đ Phan Boi Chau; US$8-20; ) While not the cleanest of the budget options, it certainly has the best location – with its terrace restaurant right above the river, next to the Cam Nam Bridge.

Thien Nga Hotel (916 330; thiennga_hotel@gmail.com; 52 Đ Ba Trieu; US$10-20; ) An old favourite that keeps getting better, this little place is terrific value – offering clean, comfortable rooms with views over the rice paddies, an indoor-outdoor swimming pool and free breakfast. The Hoi An action.

An Phu Hotel (914 345; anphutoirist@hoian.zm.com; 30 Đ Nguyễn Duy Hieu; US$12-15; ) Fans of Asian kitsch need look no further than the temple-like An Phu. Stars twinkle over the reception, dragons hover over the pool and grand staircases curve up to the rooms – where the cheaper ones have ridiculous balconies opening on to a brick wall. Owned by An Phu Tourist, the hotel’s a much better proposition than their bus services, which are best avoided.

Thanh Xuan Hotel (916 696; www.thanhxuanhotel.com; 22-23 Đ Ba Trieu; US$12-20; ) A nifty new place with the best bathtubs you are likely to find for this sort of money. Nice design, nice rooms, nice price.

Green Field Hotel (Đông Xanh Hotel; 863 484; www.greenfieldhotel.com; 423 Đ Cua Dai; dm US$5, r US$15-40; ) Painted a lurid rice-paddy green, the rooms here are comfortable and perks include a free happy hour cocktail, free wi-fi, a pool table and a swimming pool. You’ll have to enquire specifically about the basic four-person dorm, as they keep it quiet.
Other budget options: Hop Yen Hotel (863 153; hopyenhotel@yahoo.com; D Ba Trieu; r US$56-62; 🛋️) A humble hostel that has helpful staff. The cheapest rate will get you a small room with no air-conditioning up four flights of stairs.

Phu Thinh I Hotel (861 297; www.phuithinhhotels.com; 144 D Tran Phu; r US$52-60; 🛋️ 🚿) Some of the rooms are dark and windowless, but the location's great, the price is good and there's a pleasant garden forecourt.

**MIDRANGE**

Phuong Nam Hotel (893 401; www.hoianphuong namhotel.com; 224 D Ly Thai To; r US$12-30; 🛋️ 🚿) This popular new place with clean, comfy rooms is tied in with the Sihh Café open-tour crowd. The quiet location to the north of town is a blessing and a curse, as there's not much in easy walking distance. Hourly shuttles head to and from the centre and bicycles are provided free of charge.

An Huy Hotel (862 408; www.anhuyhotel.com; 30 Ð Phan Boi Chau; r US$18-25; 🛋️ 🚿) Some of this large complex face on to beautiful fields and a lotus lake. The quiet rooms are fitted with dark wooden furniture, and some have power showers.

Ha An Hotel (863 126; nhuquang@ptt.vn; 6-8 D Phan Boi Chau; r US$30-50; 🛋️ 💞) A French Quarter hotel, with a dose of decorative flair. This strip of buildings is built in Hoi An style (one French, one Chinese and so on), all set in a lush garden.

Other solid options, both with rooms facing on to central swimming pools, backing on to rice fields:

**HIGH END**

Thien Thanh Hotel (Blue Sky Hotel; 916 545; www.blueysky-hoi.com; 16 D Ba Trieu; r US$55-65; 🛋️ 🚿) Most of the rooms have breezy balconies at the back with views over the rice paddies. The hotel is smart, laid-back and friendly. The swimming pool and wireless internet are the icing on the cake.

Vinh Hung 1 Hotel (861 621; quangquy.hai@dng.vn; 143 D Tran Phu; r US$51-45; 🛋️ 🚿) Set in a classic Chinese trading house, this is an atmospheric hotel. Splash the cash for one of two rooms.

Pho Hoi Riverside Resort (862 628; www.phohei riversidehoian.com; T1, Cam Nam Village; r US$65-60, bun-galow US$50-70; 🛋️ 🚿 🚿) This sprawling, flash resort has a lovely quiet location and a lush garden. Rooms are enormous and set around a central swimming pool.

**TOP END**

Vinh Hung Resort (916 577; vinhhung.hai@dng.vn; An Hoi Peninsula; r US$70-100, ste US$110; 🛋️ 🚿 🚿) The latest member of the Vinh Hung family has a lovely quiet location and a lush garden. Rooms are enormous and set around a central swimming pool.

Life Resort Hoi An (914 555; www.life-resorts.com; 1 D Pham Hong Thai; r US$159, ste US$182-308; 🛋️ 🚿 🚿) The most luxurious option in Hoi An, Life Resort has a prime French Quarter riverside frontage, lush gardens and a stunning infinity pool framed by frangipani trees. The rooms are beautifully designed, and the spa treatments suitably enticing.

Eating

Hoi An’s main contribution to Vietnamese cuisine is cao lau, doughy flat noodles combined with croutons, bean sprouts and greens and topped off with pork slices. It is mixed with crumbled, crispy rice paper immediately before eating. Other Hoi An specialities are fried won ton, banh xeo (crispy savoury pancakes rolled with herbs in fresh rice paper) and the delicate ‘white rose’ (shrimp encased in rice paper and steamed).

The beauty of Hoi An is that you can find a spectacular cheap meal at the Central Market and in local restaurants in secluded residential lanesways – or you can choose an upmarket eatery, lavish even by Western standards, serving excellent fusion cuisine. There are heaps of such restaurants on D Nguyen Thai Hoc, D Tran Phu and on the waterfront. A newer stretch of eateries and bars is worth exploring, facing the Old Town on the An Hoi riverbank. While a pricy town for Vietnam, it remains a bargain for most visitors.

**VIETNAMESE – TRADITIONAL**

Green Moss (863 728; 155 D Nguyen Duy Hieu; dishes 10,000-30,000d) Housed in a lovely French-colonial house, Green Moss serves a tasty mix of Vietnamese and Thai dishes with plenty of vegetarian options. Try for the two-person tables under the shade of the trees on the colonial-banneled façade.

**VIETNAMESE – UPMARKET**

**INTERNATIONAL**

Hai Scout Café (863 210; 98 D Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 12,000-55,000d; 🛋️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Another interesting Old Town building, it stretches into a large garden courtyard which breaks into a bar by night. It serves sandwiches, Western-style breakfasts, Vietnamese and European mains, and real espresso. There’s a display on WWF projects in central Vietnam out back, and some traditional minority tribal crafts for sale.

Café Can (861 525; 74 D Bac Dang; dishes 15,000-70,000d) Housed in a grand old French building, this café has a wide sundek out front for a breezy bite to eat. Choose from Vietnamese and international dishes or just dabble with the drinks.

**THE CARGO CLUB** (861 489; 107 D Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 16,000-70,000d; 🛋️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you’re chasing an omelette for breakfast or a baguette for lunch, this is your place. It has mouth-watering pastries downstairs and distinguished dining upstairs downstairs a balcony terrace overlooking the river. The menu’s an eclectic mix of French, Italian, Vietnamese and Thai. After dark it morphs into a groovy bar.
Omar Khayyam’s Indian Restaurant (☎ 864 538; 24 D Tran Hung Dao; dishes 30,000-80,000d) The place for curry connoisseurs, with plenty of vegetarian options.

Hoi An Hai Connoisseur (☎ 861 652; 64 D Bach Dang; dishes 30,000-110,000d; ☏ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This seafood restaurant serves innovative Vietnamese concoctions and some Swedish dishes to keep the chef-owner in touch with his roots.

Good Morning Vietnam (☎ 910 227; 34 D Le Loi; mains 38,000-105,000d) The real deal with Italian owners and chefs, it serves the best pizzas and pastas in town.

Drinking
For a little place, Hoi An has quite the selection of interesting bars – most offering two for one local cocktails in happy hours that stretch dangerously long. Many of them are open into the early hours, which is quite unusual in itself. If you last the distance, you may have the uniquely Vietnamese experience of stepping over sleeping hotel staff catching their precious few hours of rest on the reception floor.

Avoid xe om drivers at night offering to take you out-to-of-the-way venues. We’ve heard reports of extortionate prices for the return trip being demanded, occasionally accompanied by physical threats. Luckily all the best bars are smack in the centre of the Old Town.

Good Morning Vietnam (☎ 910 227; 34 D Le Loi) This swanky bar wouldn’t be out of place in London, particularly given the Brit-pop playlist. The walls are plastered in pop-art portraits of everyone from Marx, Lenin, Mao and Che to Marilyn, Gandhi and Bono-as-Superman.

Tam Tam Cafe (☎ 862 728; 110 D Nguyen Thai Hoc) Tam Tam has its home in a lovingly restored tea house. There are tables on the street, but the heart and soul of this place remains upstairs, where there is a large lounge and dining area as well as a popular pool table. European and Vietnamese food is on offer here, and there’s a fine wine list and bar snacks for those just wanting something to partner a jug of beer.

Lounge Bar (☎ 910 480; 102 D Nguyen Thai Hoc) Just along the road from Tam Tam, this is a stylish conversion of an ancient house with a huge drinks menu. Out back are cushions and a chill-out area.

Treat’s Cafe (☎ 861 125; 158 D Tran Phu) The back-packer bar of old Hoi An, this place is regularly full to bursting. It is a sprawling place with a restaurant-cafe upstairs. The oh-so-happy happy hours between 4pm and 9pm include two-for-one spirits and bargain beer.

Re-Treat Cafe (☎ 910 527; 69 D Tran Hung Dao) Re-creates Treat’s recipe in the newer part of town, ‘same as before better’. Not quite, but saves a walk if you’re staying here.

Shoppping
Hoi An has a long history of flogging goods to international visitors, and while the port’s no longer in business, the people of Hoi An haven’t lost their commercial edge. It’s a common occurrence for travellers not planning to buy anything to leave Hoi An laden down with extra bags – which, by the way, are easily purchased here.

The big lure is the clothes (see p262). The number of tailor shops is just extraordinary – somewhere around 500. For a look at the material available locally, take a peek at the Hoi An Cloth Market (D Tran Phu). Hoi An has long been known for fabric production.

It is not only clothes that are being turned out in quantity – shoes are now a popular purchase. The cobblers here can copy anything from sneakers (trainers) to the highest heels or the coolest Cubans. Prices are very low, so it’s a great place to pick up sandals, copycat Campers or anything else that takes your fancy.

Reaching Out (☎ 862 468; 103 D Nguyen Thai Hoc; ☏ 7.30am-7pm) This is a bargain place to spend a morning doing. It’s a fair-trade gift shop with profits going towards assisting disabled artisans.

The presence of numerous tourists has turned the fake-antique business into a major growth industry for Hoi An. Theoretically you could find something here that is really old, but it’s hard to believe that all the genuine stuff wasn’t scooped up long ago. Proceed with scepticism. On the other hand, there is some really elegant artwork around, even if it was turned out only yesterday. Paintings are generally of the mass-produced kind, but are still hand-painted; for a few US dollars you can’t complain. A row of art galleries (D Nguyen Thinh Khai), inside the gorgeous old buildings just across from the Japanese Covered Bridge, are great to browse through.

And now that you’ve bought that lovely artwork, you need to light it properly. Lighting is a major growth industry here and lanterns lead the way. Popular Chinese lanterns come in various shapes and sizes, all easily foldable.

(Continued on page 252)

Woodcarvings are also a local speciality. Cross Cam Nam Bridge to Cam Nam Village, to watch the carvers at work. Woodcarving is a speciality on Cam Kim Island (see right). Vietnam has a great reputation for its ceramics, and while much of what is on sale here comes from around Hanoi, it is worth stocking up if you are only visiting central Vietnam. The black pottery with a glassy glaze is particularly striking. It’s best to browse the strip of small ceramics shops (D Bach Dang) along the riverfront.

Getting There & Away
AIR The closest airport is 45 minutes away, in Danang (see p234).

BUS The main Hoi An bus station (☎ 861 284; 96 D Hung Vuong) is 1km west of the centre of town. Buses from here go to Danang (8000d, one hour), Quang Ngai and other points. More frequent services to Danang leave from the northern bus station (D Le Hong Phong) from 5am until the late afternoon.

A regular stop on the open-bus route, it’s easy to pick up a service to or from Hué (four tours) or Nha Trang (US$6 to US$8, 11 to 12 hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE
To get to Danang (30km) you can either head north out of town and join up with Hwy 1A, or east to Cua Dai Beach and follow the excellent new road along China Beach. The going rate for a motorbike taxi between Danang and Hoi An is US$4 to US$6. A taxi costs around US$10.

Shop around for rates on car hire. A journey to Hué can vary from US$35 to US$70. A day trip around the surrounding area, including My Son, is about for US$15 to US$20. Agree on your itinerary in advance and get a copy in writing.

Getting Around
Anywhere within town can be reached on foot. To go further afield, rent a bicycle from 10,000d per day – check with your hotel as it may provide them free. Cross the An Hoi Footbridge for a pleasant walk or ride through attractive rural countryside. A motorbike without/
CRAVING THAT PERFECT FIT

Caution – having clothes made in Hoi An is extremely addictive. You may be able to walk past the first few tailor stores without wavering, but given that you’re likely to pass dozens every day you spend here, chances are you’ll eventually crack. And when you do, watch out. It’s not unusual to see even hardened blokes gleefully ploughing through fabric rolls, trying to pick the perfect satin lining for that second new suit.

Hoi An’s numerous tailors can make anything and usually within a day. They’re master copiers – bring in an item of clothing you want duplicated or a picture in a magazine, pick out your fabric, and the next day your vision will be brought to life. You’ve also extremely skilled in the art of flattering and pampering. A fitting session can do wonders for the ego – ‘You look so good in that…why not buy another one?’

Bargaining has a place here, but basically you get what you pay for. The better tailors and better fabrics are more expensive. One of the hundreds of tailors will probably knock out a men’s suit for US$20, but a good-quality, lined woollen suit is more likely to cost US$40 to US$70. Shirts, skirts and casual trousers hover around the US$10 mark.

The trick is to pick a shop you’re comfortable with, know your fabrics, check in advance on the details (thread colour, linings and buttons) and allow plenty of time for fittings and adjustments.

When buying silk, it’s important to ascertain that it’s real and not a synthetic imitation. The only real test is with a cigarette or match (synthetic fibres melt and silk burns), but try not to set the shop on fire. If you’re concerned about its authenticity ask for a cut-off sample of the material and go outside to test it. Similarly, don’t accept on face value that a fabric is 100% cotton or wool without giving it a good feel and ensuring you’re happy with the quality.

Remember to check the seams of the finished garment: a single set of stitching along the inside edges will soon cause fraying and, in many cases, big gaping holes. All well-tailored garments have a second set of stitches (known in the trade as blanket stitching), which binds the edge, overwearing the fabric so fraying is impossible. Where possible, also insist on the clothes being lined, as it helps them move and fall in the right direction.

There are so many tailors that it’s difficult to single out individual stores for mention, and impossible (although tempting) to test them all out. Most use a range of outsourced workers who can vary in quality. If you’re planning on getting a lot of stuff made, consider trying out a couple of shops with small items before taking the plunge on your wedding dress. That said, some places we’ve heard good things about are Phuoc An (862 615; 6 B Le Loi), Fan (910 474; 47 D Nguyen Thai Hoc), A Dong Silk (861 386; www.adongsilk.com; 40 D Le Loi) and Faifoo (862 566; D Tran Hung Dao).

Because some of the ornamentation work at My Son was never finished, archaeologists know that the Chams first built their structures and only then carved decorations into the brickwork. Researchers have yet to figure out for certain how they managed to get the baked bricks to stick together. According to one theory, they used a paste prepared with a botanical oil that is indigenous to central Vietnam. During the period in their history, the summits of some of the towers were completely covered with a layer of gold.

During the American War this region was completely devastated and depopulated in extended bitter fighting. Finding it to be a convenient staging ground, the VC used My Son as a base; in response the Americans

the industry has been in decline. The remaining artisans employed in this hot and sweaty work don’t mind if you stop for a gander, though they’re happier if you buy something. Many tours to My Son visit here on the way back to Hoi An. For a more personalised experience, contact Mr Trung (922 695), a villager who arranges day tours, including lunch and transport, for around US$10.

MY SON

Set within the jungle 55km from Hoi An are the enigmatic ruins of My Son (731 309; admission 60,000d; 6.30am-4pm), the most important remains of the ancient kingdom of Champa and a Unesco World Heritage site. Although Vietnam has better preserved Cham sites, none are as extensive and few have such beautiful surroundings – in a verdant valley surrounded by hills and overlooked by Cat’s Tooth Mountain (Hon Quap). Clear streams run between the structures and past nearby coffee plantations.

During the centuries when Tra Kieu (which was then known as Simhapura) served as the political capital, My Son was considered the most important intellectual and religious centre, and may also have served as a burial place for Cham monarchs.

My Son is considered to be Champa’s smaller version of the grand cities of Southeast Asia’s other Indian-influenced civilisations: Angkor (Cambodia), Ayu-thaya (Thailand), Bagan (Myanmar) and Borobudur (Java). American bombs have reduced many of the towers to ruins, but there’s still plenty to see.

History

My Son (pronounced ‘me sun’) became a religious centre under King Bhadravarman in the late 4th century and was constantly occupied until the 13th century – the longest period of development of any monument in Southeast Asia. Most of the temples were dedicated to Cham kings associated with divinities, particularly Shiva, who was regarded as the founder and protector of Champa’s dynasties.

Champa’s contact with Java was extensive. Cham scholars were sent to Java to study and there was a great deal of commerce between the two empires – Cham pottery has been found on Java and, in the 12th century, the Cham king wed a Javanese woman.

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bombed the monuments. Traces of 68 structures have been found, of which 25 were repeatedly pillaged in previous centuries by the Chinese, Khmer and Vietnamese. The American bombing failed to destroy about 20 of these, although some sustained extensive damage. Today, Vietnamese authorities are attempting to restore as much as possible of the remaining sites.

**Information**
The entry fee includes local transport from the parking area to the sites, about 2km away. By departing from Hoi An at about 5am, you will arrive to wake up the gods (and the guards) for sunrise and could be leaving just as the tour groups reach the area. It gets very busy at My Son; go early or late to soak up the atmosphere in relative peace and quiet.

**The Site**
Past the ticket office you will find the large map of the site. The complex includes toilets and a souvenier shop.

Archaeologists have divided My Son's monuments into 10 main groups, uninspiring as the name would suggest. The site was erected in the 4th century, destroyed by US attacks. According to locals, massive B5, built in the 10th century, was used for storing sacred books and objects used in ceremonies performed in B1. The boat-shaped roof (the ‘bow’ and ‘stern’ have fallen off) demonstrates the influence of Malayo-Polynesian architecture. Unlike the sanctuaries, this building has windows and the Cham masonry inside is original. Over the window on the outside wall facing B4 is a brick bas-relief of two elephants under a tree with two birds in it.

The ornamentation on the exterior walls of B4 is an excellent example of a Cham decorative style, typical of the 9th century and said to resemble 8th-century A1. This style is unlike anything found in other Southeast Asian cultures.

B3 has an Indian-influenced pyramidal roof typical of Cham towers. Inside B6 is a bath-shaped basin for keeping sacred water that was poured over the linga in B1; this is the only known example of a Cham basin.

Around the perimeter of Group B are small temples, B7 to B13, dedicated to the gods of the directions of the compass (dikpalaka).

**GROUP A**
The path from Groups B, C and D to Group A leads eastward from near D4. Group A was almost completely destroyed by US bombing and was intentionally finished off by a helicopter-borne sapper team. All that remains today is a pile of collapsed brick walls. After the destruction of A1, Philippe Stern, an expert on Cham art and curator of the Guimet Museum in Paris, wrote a letter of protest to the US president Nixon, who ordered US forces to continue killing the VC, but not to do any further damage to Cham monuments.

A1 was the only Cham sanctuary with two faces. One faced east, in the direction of the Hindu gods; the other faced west towards Groups B, C and D and the spirits of the ancestor kings reputedly buried there. Inside A1 is a stone altar. Among the ruins, some of the brilliant brickwork, (typical 10th-century style) is still visible. At the base of A1 on the side facing A10 (decorated in 9th-century style) is a carving of a worshipping figure flanked by round columns, with a Javanese sea-monster god (kala-makara) above. There are plans to partially restore A1 and A10 in the future.

**OTHER GROUPS**

**GROUP B**
The main kalai (sanctuary), B1, was dedicated to Bhadresvara, which is a contraction of the name of King Bhadravarman, who built the first temple at My Son, combined with ‘-esvara’, which means Shiva. The first building on this site was erected in the 4th century, destroyed in the 6th century and then again rebuilt in the 7th century. Only the 11th-century base, made of large sandstone blocks, remains – the brickwork walls have disappeared. The niches in the wall were used to hold lamps (Cham sanctuaries had no windows). The linga inside was discovered during excavations in 1985, 1m below its current position.

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B2 is a gate.

Around the perimeter of Group B are small temples, B7 to B13, dedicated to the gods of the directions of the compass (dikpalaka).

**GROUP D**
Buildings D1 and D2, which were once meditation halls, now house small displays of Cham sculpture.

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IS THAT WHAT I THINK IT IS?

Yes, it’s a giant stone penis.

A common sight around Cham temples, these linga have an important spiritual value, symbolising the God Shiva. You’ll often find them on a square base with a channel cut through it, a yoni, which represents female genitalia. An important Cham religious practice at My Son saw priests heading up to Cat’s Tooth Mountain (where Shiva was believed to reside) to retrieve water from a sacred stream. This was then ceremonially poured over the head of the linga, draining out through the spout of the yoni.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Garden** [27] 734 028; thanhphonghoteld@dnv.vn; s/d 200,000/300,000.

If you’re serious about beating the crowds and don’t quite believe that 5.30am exists except at the end of a hard night, it’s possible to stay right at My Son’s gates. This complex offers a number of bungalows scattered around an attractive garden. There’s also a large restaurant and a café on site.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

**CAR**

A hire car with driver from Hoi An to My Son costs around US$15 to US$20. Going under your own steam gives you the option of arriving before or after the tour groups, and My Son is quite atmospheric when you’re one of only a few people there.

**BUS/MINIBUS**

Numerous hotels in Hoi An can book a day trip to My Son that includes a stop-off at Tra Kieu. At US$2 to US$3 per person, you could hardly do it cheaper unless you walked. The
MINIBUSES depart from Hoi An at 8am and return at 1pm. Some agencies offer the option of returning to Hoi An by boat, which adds an extra couple of hours to the trip.

**MOTORBIKE**
It’s possible to get to the sites by rented motorbike. Make sure you park in the official parking area. Otherwise, get somebody else to drive you on their motorbike and then ask them to wait for you.

**TRA KIEU (SIMHAPURA)**
Formerly called Simhapura (Lion Citadel), Tra Kieu was the first capital city of Champa, serving in that capacity from the 4th to the 8th centuries. Today nothing remains of the ancient city except the rectangular ramparts. A large number of artefacts, including some of the finest carvings in the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang (p231), were found here.

**Mountain Church**
You can get a wonderful view of the city’s outlines and the surrounding countryside from the Mountain Church (Nha Tho Nui), on the top of Buu Chau Hill. This modern, open-air structure was built in 1970 to replace an earlier church destroyed by an American bomb. A Cham tower once stood on this spot. It’s worth visiting the little shop at the bottom of the hill to look at a picture of the site in antiquity and peruse its collection of small artefacts.

The Mountain Church is 6.5km from Hwy 1A and 19.5km from My Son. It is down a street opposite the town’s Clinic of Western Medicine (Quan Thuoc Tay). Expect to stop for directions.

**Getting There & Away**
Many day trips to My Son from Hoi An include a stop-off at Tra Kieu. Otherwise you’ll need to rent a bike or a car and driver (see p261).

**TAM KY**
Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Nam province, is a nondescript town on the highway between Quang Ngai and Danang. However, the nearby Cham towers of Chien Dan (Chien Dan Cham: Hwy 1A; admission: 10,000d; 8-11.30am & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) are wonderful.

In a pleasant rural setting, few tourists venture here. Chances are you’ll be left alone to explore the three towers and small sculpture museum. Although they escaped the bombing that My Son endured, scars from the American War are evident. The eerie feel of the interior of the middle tower is heightened by the numerous bullet holes in the wall – many people died here.

Dating from the 11th or 12th century, each kalan (sanctuary) faces east. Many of the decorative friezes remain on the outside walls. The middle tower was dedicated to Shiva; at the front left-hand edge of its base there are carvings of dancing girls and a fight scene. Look for the grinning faces high up between this and the left tower (honouring Brahma) and the two elephants at the rear. The right-hand tower is dedicated to Vishnu.

The site is visible to the right of the road on your approach to Tam Ky, 47km south of Hoi An (5km north of Tam Ky). It will take about 50 minutes to reach by car, and can easily be combined with a trip to My Son.

Villagers were under attack by anti-French forces, a vision of a lady in white, believed to be Mary the mother of Jesus, appeared on the top of the church. At the end of a 21-day siege during which 500 shells were fired on the village, the church and those who had sheltered in it remained unharmed. While not officially recognised by the Catholic Church, this is a popular site for Vietnamese pilgrims. The original Mountain Church (see left) was built to commemorate this event – although it didn’t achieve such divine protection itself during the American War.

Tra Kieu Church is 7km from Hwy 1A and 19km from My Son. It is down a street opposite the town’s Clinic of Western Medicine (Quan Thuoc Tay). Expect to stop for directions.

A priest from here, who died in 1988, was interested in the Cham civilisation and amassed a collection of artefacts found by local people. A 2nd-floor room in the building to the right of the church opened as a museum in 1990. The round ceramic objects with faces on them, which date from the 8th and 10th centuries, were affixed to the ends of tiled roofs. The face is of Kala, the God of Time.

According to local belief this church was the site of a miracle in 1885, witnessed by 80 people. At that time, when the Catholic worshippers were under attack by anti-French forces, a vision of a lady in white, believed to be Mary the mother of Jesus, appeared on the top of the church. At the end of a 21-day siege during which 500 shells were fired on the village, the church and those who had sheltered in it remained unharmed. While not officially recognised by the Catholic Church, this is a popular site for Vietnamese pilgrims. The original Mountain Church (see left) was built to commemorate this event – although it didn’t achieve such divine protection itself during the American War.

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