

48 HOURS IN HOI AN

A HISTORIC TRADING PORT IN CENTRAL VIETNAM BRIMS WITH HERITAGE BUILDINGS, LANTERN-STRUNG ALLEYS, AND DELICIOUS FLAVOURS **BY MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA**

Hoi An dazzles with riverside cafés, art museums and pushcarts selling flavoursome street food.



Men in conical bamboo hats pedal cycle rickshaws that move lazily against weathered ochre facades. Ornate mosaic sculptures of dragons and carp fish appear at unassuming corners that lead to narrow streets illuminated with silk lanterns in hues of turquoise and pink. Life in Hoi An is vibrant, offering up opportunities for shutterbugs at every turn.

Located between Ho Chi Minh City in the south and Hanoi in the north, Hoi An in central Vietnam stretches along the north bank of the Thu Bon River until it empties into the Pacific Ocean. With a coastal backdrop, the city was once an important trading port for Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Dutch merchants trading in silk, spices,

and ceramics between the 15th and the 19th centuries. Vestiges of their culture, cuisine, and architecture are preserved in Hoi An's Old Town—a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tourists flock from the world over to explore the pagodas and waterways, to shop and eat at one of Vietnam's most atmospheric cities.

DAY 1

8 A.M. BEACH MORNING

While Hoi An's countryside districts paint a pretty picture, the city's heritage quarter is its main draw. Base yourself at the riverside Hotel Royal, situated within walking distance of all the major attractions, night sights, and pushcarts hawking street food. Kick-start the

day early by grabbing one of the hotel's bicycles and head straight for An Bang Beach, situated 15 minutes away. Park yourself on one of the sun beds lining the white sand strip and sip on coconut water or snack on cold Vietnamese spring rolls before heading to the Old Town.

11 A.M. TINKER TAILOR

Wear the city's heart on your sleeve. Hoi An's fashion is elegant and timeless. Merchants from across the Far East came to the city to trade in silk. The legacy lives on with several generations engaged in the tailoring craft. Place an order for a custom-made garment, like the ao dai—a long-sleeved tunic with front and back ankle-length panels,



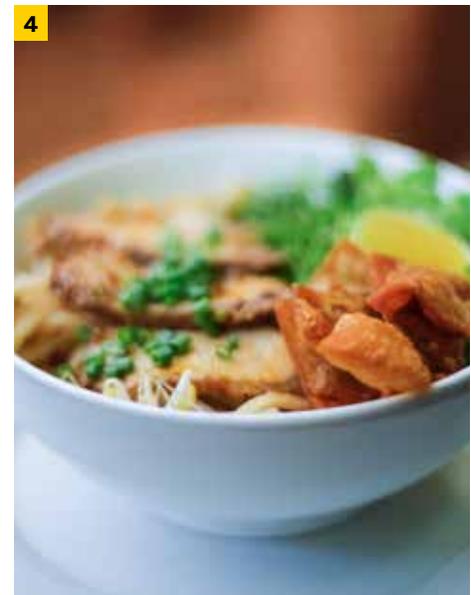
1



2



3



4

Traces of cultural history are evident in Old Town's architecture, such as the 200-year-old Tan Ky House (1) and Phuc Kien (3), a 17th-century Fujian Chinese meeting hall; Banh mi (2) is a Vietnamese spin on the French baguette, while the cao lau noodles (4) are a regional delicacy.

worn over trousers. The traditional Vietnamese outfit makes for a unique souvenir and can be bought from any of the apparel stores speckled across Old Town.

12 P.M. CULTURE VULTURE

Old Town is like a land frozen in time. The preserved heritage area is peppered with timber frame houses, pagodas, Chinese assembly halls, boutiques, and cafés. A ticket (VNĐ1,20,000/₹370) to the region can be used over multiple days and allows access to any five sights of your choosing.

1.30 P.M. A MARKET AFFAIR

On the banks of the Thu Bon River sits Central Market—a frenzied hub full of locals shopping at stalls selling fresh produce and traditional crafts, and hawkers vending Vietnamese food.

For a Vietnamese spin on the French baguette, bite into a banh mi, a light-as-air sandwich stuffed with a choice of pork or chicken, packed with slivers of fresh veggies and herbs. Even when you think you've had your fill, the market continues to impress with its array of local craft. Pick between coconut bowls with mosaic eggshell inlay, woven bamboo hats and carved ironwood figurines of animals.

4 P.M. COFFEE BREAK

As the second largest coffee producer in the world, the Vietnamese caffeine experience is not to be missed. Strong, dark, and served with condensed milk, it is the perfect tool to combat an afternoon slump. Located in the Old Town, the Hoi An Roastery, which roasts its coffee on site, is a cosy spot for a hot or iced fresh brew. Grab chairs

by the street side, sit in a tree-shaded courtyard, or make a beeline for the air-conditioned indoors, where lanterns light up the wood-lined interiors.

7.30 P.M. CRAFT BREWS BY THE RIVER

As dusk settles, the Old Town dons a new avatar. Silk lanterns are lit and local games are played on raised bamboo platforms. Stroll across the Cau An Hoi Bridge to watch row boats slowly ply the river, laden with tourists floating lanterns on the water. Kick back and sample Vietnamese craft beers in a bougainvillea and lantern-festooned courtyard at the riverside Pasteur Street Brewing Co. The taproom shares its menu with Mai Fish restaurant, where the produce is brought straight from the riverside Central Market into the kitchen. Lap up local favourites such as



The Central Market bustles with locals shopping for fresh produce and traditional crafts.

white rose dumplings—delicate flower-shaped parcels filled with pork and shrimp. Don't forget to sample *cao lau* noodles—thick Japanese-influenced rice noodles with slices of Chinese-style soy pork and fresh herbs swimming in light broth.

DAY 2

10 A.M. OLD TOWN WONDERS

Use your pass and tick off sightseeing attractions before the tour groups descend in the afternoon. Walk through the arched Japanese covered bridge built in 1593 and catch a glimpse of its yin yang tile embellished roof. Make your way to the 200-year-old Tan Ky House, a remnant of the wooden shop houses built by traders who frequented the city until the 18th century. Still intact, the upper storey is the private residence of the family's seventh and eighth generations, while the ground floor, a fine blend of Chinese and Japanese architecture, is open to the public. At Phuc Kien, an ornate 17th-century meeting hall for the Fujian Chinese community, a bonsai-filled courtyard leads into a large hall, where red, cone-shaped, spiral incense sticks are suspended from the ceiling like chandeliers. There are plenty of museums that dabble in folklore and

art, but to better understand the city's history, the Hoi An Museum is a good place to start.

2 P.M. LOCAL BINGE

At Hoi An Quán, a restaurant located in a charming 17th-century Chinese house with wooden shutter windows, sit beside a koi pond and roll your own spring rolls in rice paper. Grilled meat arrives on skewers of sugarcane, accompanied with fresh greens like fish mint. *Banh xeo*, a crispy pancake stuffed with pork, shrimp, and greens, is a real winner.

5 P.M. BEFORE SUNSET

Take a break from the hectic streets and get a bird's-eye view of Hoi An from its highest rooftop bar, The Deck. A spot at the lively poolside, situated eight storeys high, affords panoramas of Old Town's sloping red roofs and the winding Thu Bon River. Add to it pink skies and glowing lanterns on the water below for an unforgettable sundowner. Sip ginger-flavoured cocktails in traditional earthen pots at the bar and then head downstairs to ground level to sample the city's Japanese heritage, such as *uramaki* rolls and barbecue-style robata-yaki grills at the Wakaku restaurant.

8.30 P.M. NIGHT CRAWLERS

Hoi An's wonderfully weird Night Market (6 p.m.-10 p.m. daily) is a one-stop destination for everything from a foot massage to a pho along one buzzing street. Grab a stool on a sidewalk, sip on the local Larue beer, and take in the sights: families dressed in matching outfits, a kaleidoscope of lanterns, and folk tune-blaring pushcarts dispensing local durian ice cream.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There Regular flights between Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore and Hanoi require a layover in Singapore or Bangkok. There are direct flights between Kolkata and Hanoi. From there, fly to Da Nang and drive an hour to reach Hoi An. Indians are eligible for an e-visa (evisa.xuatnhapcanh.gov.vn). It costs \$25/₹1,800 and takes three working days. **Stay** Hotel Royal's riverside location is ideal to reach the Old Town on foot, but far enough from the streets' chaos (hotelroyalhoian.vn; doubles from ₹7,000).