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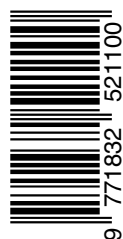
HA LONG STORY

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HA LONG STORY

WITH THOUSANDS OF ISLANDS, STUNNING ROCK FORMATIONS AND REMARKABLE BIODIVERSITY, VIETNAM'S FAMOUS HA LONG BAY STANDS FIRMLY AMONG THE GREAT MODERN WONDERS OF THE WORLD. LARA DUNSTON DISCOVERS THE SEEMINGLY LIMITLESS JOYS OF CRUISING THESE MAGICAL WATERS.



CRUISE IN COMFORT
A Ha Long Bay cruise aboard an Au Co vessel is to experience resort-style luxury and peerless service.

Breathtakingly beautiful and beguiling, Ha Long Bay in northeast Vietnam is one of those enigmatic places that captures the imagination and doesn't let go.

A dazzling unspoilt seascape, distinguished by striking clusters of verdant islands, craggy islets, limestone karsts, and schist outcrops that dramatically rise out of jade-coloured waters, sweeping Ha Long Bay is a jaw-dropping sight to behold.

Immortalised in poetry, folk tales, myths, legends, and even on the cinema screen – most famously in the 1992 French epic *Indochine*, in which Ha Long Bay temporarily steals the limelight from star Catherine Deneuve – Ha Long Bay or Vinh Ha Long translates in Vietnamese as 'descending dragon bay' or, more accurately, 'where the dragon descends into the sea'.

On each of the four cruises that I did on the bay, a guide told me the legend of how Ha Long Bay was made when a giant dragon came down from heaven, its colossal thrashing tail carving out valleys and peaks along the way, and the rocky pinnacles forming after he plunged into the sea, creating the hundreds of islands of Ha Long Bay.



Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994 and located in Quang Ninh province, Ha Long Bay, and its adjoining yet more off-the-beaten-track Bái Tu Long Bay, with which it shares geographical and geological characteristics, extends along 120 kilometres of Vietnam's coastline, from the Chinese border in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin to the southeast, and Cát Bà island in the southwest.

Ha Long Bay is often compared to two similar areas that have also been stunningly sculpted by nature (or dragons, depending on your beliefs): Guilin in China and Krabi in Thailand. Ha Long Bay is much more stupendous, however. For starters, it is vast. The whole area covers a massive 1,553 square kilometres with around 2,000 islands and islets, although the actual area designated by UNESCO stretches only some 434 square kilometres and contains 1,600 islands, islets and karsts. Local guides claim it is more like 3,000.

There is also more to see at Ha Long Bay than Guilin and Krabi. The area has taken shape over 500 million years, as it has adapted to different events, conditions and environments, with the limestone karsts developing over 20 million years in response to the extremes

of the tropical climate and repeated regression and transgression of the sea. The karsts make for a striking sight as a result, coming in all shapes and sizes. Some resemble stone icebergs, others conical peaks, while some are towering pillars. The more developed shapes have earned them the not-so-creative monikers such as Ga Choi Islet or Fighting Cock Islet, which, unsurprisingly, looks like a fighting cock, and Voi Islet or Elephant Islet, which sort of looks like an elephant. Tour guides on all cruises take great joy in pointing these out.

Another highlight of Ha Long Bay is the rich biodiversity, with tropical evergreen, seashore and oceanic bio-systems, some 14 endemic species of flora, 60 endemic species of fauna, 200 species of fish and 450 different kinds of molluscs. Blanketed in luxuriant vegetation, some islands secret away hidden

grottoes and monumental caves, while others are dotted with slender sandy beaches.

Taking in jaw-dropping panoramas of the islands from the deck of a boat is how visitors to Ha Long Bay spend most of their time. Many of the schist and limestone islets are so small they are little more than enormous rocks or conical peaks, while larger islets have no shore, with only sheer limestone cliffs rising vertically out of the water. Due to their precipitous nature, the vast majority of islands are uninhabited, despite a history of human use dating back to prehistoric times, and cannot be visited.

Bigger limestone islands, boasting grottoes, arches and tunnels, can be kayaked through, revealing hidden crater-like lakes. Dau Be Island, for example, has six lakes, enclosed by high walls blanketed with vegetation. Other larger islands



ENTER THE DRAGON
Ha Long Bay's spectacular islands, karsts and schists were formed by heavenly dragons, according to local lore.

OUR PICK OF THE MOST LUXURIOUS CRUISES

The vast majority of tourists experience Ha Long Bay on an officially registered cruise boat, from traditional-style wooden junks to sleek white modern vessels. Choice of cruises range from day-tripper boats – usually crammed with backpackers and package tourists – to one or two-night cruises, which are by far the best options for getting the most out of the bay. Bear in mind that Ha Long Bay is one of Vietnam's most popular destinations, so cruises often fill during high season and should be booked in advance.

AU CO

The gleaming new white Au Co vessels (they currently have two in operation) are hands down Ha Long Bay's most modern and most luxurious with 32 spacious, beautifully decorated, light-filled cabins that wouldn't be out of place in a five-star resort. Each cabin boasts big bathrooms, comfy beds and romantic balconies. There are plenty of public spaces to relax in, including rattan sofas in the bar area, an enormous and very elegant restaurant, and a wonderful expansive sundeck offering sweeping vistas. The service and cuisine – served a la carte-style with a choice of dishes – are unrivalled on the bay. Cruise itineraries include Cát Bà Island, Sung Sot Cave and a floating fishing village, as well as the ubiquitous cooking class. Like most, these are all inclusive cruises.

www.aucoocruises.com

BHAYA LEGEND

Favoured by dot-com billionaires and celebrities for their privacy and personal attention, the delightful Bhaya Legend fleet of diminutive traditional junks is dedicated to customised private charters, with eight different vessels offering one, two, three or four ensuite cabins that can be configured for double or twin accommodation, plus a spacious dining room and deck areas with seats and sunbeds. Rates include all meals (set menus) and non-alcoholic drinks. My only complaint was that there was no interior sitting area with sofas – a must during the winter months when it's too cold to be on deck.

www.bhayacruises.com

HERITAGE LINE: JASMINE

There are two classes of rooms on the Jasmine and it pays to pay that bit extra for the premium room, as the difference between the two is that between a four and five-star hotel room. In the style of a traditional wooden junk, the Jasmine offers something between the Au Co and Bhaya Classic in terms of quality of amenities, service, and cuisine. While meals are served buffet-style, the quality of food is a notch above the Bhaya Classic, yet the latter boat has considerably more oriental charm. The Jasmine, however, offers more space with a buzzy bar area attached to the restaurant and two expansive deck areas that are a delight to chill out on and take in the spectacular scenery. The boat visits Cát Bà Island, Tien Ong Cave and Cua Van Fishing Village and is all-inclusive, alcohol excluded.

www.heritage-line.com

BHAYA CLASSIC

Generally on par with Heritage Line's Jasmine boat in terms of the overall experience, service and quality of the cuisine, the Bhaya Classic is a cut above if you book the wonderful Royal Suite with private balcony and delightful teak interiors, and organise a romantic dinner under the stars one evening. While the Bhaya Classic is smaller than the Jasmine and when full to capacity the public spaces can sometimes feel cramped, it makes up for it by oozing an abundance of charm. If you don't dine in, meals are served buffet style. It's all-inclusive (alcohol excluded) and the itinerary includes visits to Vung Vieng fishing village by rowing boat, cycling on Cát Bà Island, and a visit to Sung Sot Cave.

www.bhayacruises.com



have purpose-built boardwalks that skirt the rock and stairs that take visitors up into spectacularly illuminated caves. Sung Sôt or Surprising Cave, on Bo Hòn Island, is one such cave with over a hundred steps leading up to Ha Long Bay's most monumental and most magnificent grotto, covering some 10,000 square metres, with a 30-metre high roof, two immense chambers featuring thousands of stalactites and stalagmites, and at its deepest point a pond and garden. Just as spectacular are the panoramic views of the bay from the top of the stairs.

Only Cát Bà Island, home to Cát Bà National Park, is a properly inhabited island replete with villages and schools that can be visited, as well as roads and

walking tracks that can be cycled or hiked, and, at Lan Ha Bay, dozens of stretches of sandy beach. The Park is home to over 1000 plant and tree species and some 30-odd mammals, including the langur – the world's most endangered primate (sadly only around 60 remain) – along with macaques, deer, civets, wild boar, squirrel, and over 70 species of birds, including hawks, hornbills and waterfowl. Most cruiseboat itineraries include a stop on the island for several hours of cycling or walking

Aside from Cát Bà Island, the rest of the bay's residents live on the water itself, with some 1,600 people inhabiting the four floating fishing villages of Vông Viêng, Cua Van, Ba Hang, and Cong Tàu. Living in colourful ramshackle wooden houses that float upon the sea, the people sustain their communities through fishing, fish farming and tourism, offering sightseeing excursions around the villages on small narrow wooden boats, or selling souvenirs, snacks and drinks to tourists. While the dilapidated shacks are simply furnished and facilities are rustic, most homes contain a television and stereo, and there are floating schools, community centres and even souvenir shops.

For many tourists, a visit to one of the floating fishing villages, included on most cruise itineraries, will be one of their most satisfying experiences on the bay – after gazing at the limestone karsts illuminated by moonlight on a magical starry night. ○



LAND OF PLENTY

Clockwise from left: There are approximately 30 species of mammals on Cát Bà Island; The spectacular caves of Bo Hòn Island; A Ha Long Bay cruise is a chance to sample the finest in Vietnamese cuisine, such as the ubiquitous pho.

THE ESSENTIALS

VISAS: You'll need a visa for Vietnam, best organised in advance of your trip through a Vietnam Embassy. A visa-upon-arrival can theoretically be arranged online and armed with paperwork you can obtain a visa at Hanoi's airport, however, lines are often long, rules change regularly, and travellers have reported being turned away.

CURRENCY: Vietnam's currency is the Vietnamese Dong (VND) and AU\$1 = VND21,890 at time of research. ATMs are everywhere in Hanoi, however, there are no ATMS on the bay. Cruise boats accept payment for extras with major credit cards, however, take plenty of Vietnamese Dong for souvenirs and tips and US dollars in case of emergency.

HOW TO GET THERE:

The gateway to Ha Long Bay is Ha Long City, however, there's no reason to stay there. Boat cruise companies offer direct transfers covering the 165-kilometre (3-4 hour) journey from Hanoi by mini-bus or private vehicle (significantly more comfortable), with a snack/shopping stop on the way.

WHEN TO GO: Promoted as a year-round destination, Ha Long Bay has a steady stream of tourists throughout the year. However, winter (December-February) can get cold and misty with grey skies, while summer (June-August) is generally hot and humid with occasional tropical storms. The best times to visit are Spring and Autumn, when skies are blue and temperatures comfortable.

WHAT TO TAKE: Cool cotton/linen clothes and swimsuit for warmer months; lightweight wet-weather jacket and winter woollens for cooler months; walking shoes and travel sandals or flip-flops; t-shirt and shorts for kayaking; mosquito repellent, sunscreen, and a hat; small daypack for excursions; and perhaps smart casual-wear for evenings.