

### **Cam Chi Street**

In the United States, we go to a restaurant, look over the menu, and then decide what we feel like eating. In Vietnam, it's often the other way around: you figure out what dish you want (Noodles? Rice? Fried shrimp?) and head to an establishment that specializes in that dish. But what if you want noodles and your dinner companion wants rice pancakes? If you head to Cam Chi Street, in Hanoi's Old Quarter, your problem will be solved. A narrow alley lined with small food stalls (the sticky rice stall at the end of the alley is, quite literally, no bigger than a hole in the wall), Cam Chi offers a wide range of traditional Vietnamese "fast food," delicious and extraordinarily cheap. And for the diners who can't agree, proprietors who are serving food to one person will usually let that person's friend bring a plate or bowl from a neighboring vendor into their shop.

### **Hang Ma Street**

Perhaps the most colorful and surprising of the Old Quarter's famous "36 Streets," Hang Ma, Votive Papers Street, features the items necessary for Vietnam's tradition of ancestor worship. Most Vietnamese believe that dead ancestors protect their descendants, and that the descendants must honor their ancestors regularly in order to keep their spirits happy. On Hang Ma Street, you'll find paper replicas of many household goods that worshippers burn as offerings to the spirits in the next world. Because Vietnamese expect that the world of the dead is much like our own, they act accordingly. Shops on Hang Ma Street sell paper houses, paper money, even paper Visa cards, automobiles, and television sets. And, because the Vietnamese are so adaptable, the establishments on Hang Ma Street have also found some additional uses for their paper products. This is the place to go for wrapping paper, party favors, and decorations for your wedding. Don't forget your camera if you're planning a visit here. For more on Hang Ma Street, see Dana's article, "**The Spirit of Hanoi.**" [http://www.thingsasian.com/goto\\_article/article.587.html](http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.587.html)

### **A Walk Around Hoan Kiem Lake**

Hoan Kiem Lake, the Lake of the Restored Sword, is the heart and soul of the city. For that reason, don't allow yourself to just drive by it on your way to the Old Quarter or the Water Puppet Show. Get out and walk. Just past dawn, you'll find dozens, if not hundreds, of Hanoians crowding the lawns around the lake doing their morning exercises. At night, you'll find lovers walking hand-in-hand (and sometimes smooching on the benches). And you may also attract street children hoping to sell you a postcard or two. Even if you don't need any postcards, consider making a purchase. Not only will you be helping a needy child, but you may also find that the subsequent conversation you have with the young person (most of whom speak some English) will be among the most satisfying you'll have in Vietnam. For more on Hoan Kiem Lake, read Dana's article, "**The Spirit of Hanoi.**" [http://www.thingsasian.com/goto\\_article/article.587.html](http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.587.html)

### **The Silk Shops of Hang Gai Street**

Even if you hate shopping, it's hard to resist a little spree in Hanoi's Old Quarter. The silk shops along Hang Gai Street offer some of the loveliest, most tantalizing souvenirs you can find (things that are much more practical to carry home than the

equally lovely, but fragile and heavy, pottery that may also tempt you). Not only can you find beautiful items made out of silk, but also finely crafted embroidery, some of which rivals the (much!) more expensive versions that come from France. If you're in town for a few days, you can get clothing made to order, but be specific about what you want, or offer a garment of your own that they can copy. The quality varies, so shop around. A couple of good places to try are Khai Silk and Le Minh Silk, across the street from each other on Hang Gai, between Luong Van Can and Hang Hom. Another good bet is one of the shops called Tan My, different branches of an enterprise run by a single family.

### **Pagodas and Temples**

Picking a favorite Hanoi pagoda or temple is like picking a favorite Vietnamese food: so much is wonderful, so how can you choose? For that reason, and because the guidebooks list the most famous already, here's one that you might—but wouldn't want—to miss. The Temple of Y Lan, on crooked Tam Thuong Street off of Hang Gai Street, lies hidden in the Old Quarter on a lane that's too narrow for even a single car. Built in homage to one of Vietnam's favorite heroines, it's a peaceful place that seems far from noise and crowds of the city, although it's only a few steps away.

### **Water Puppets**

All the guidebooks urge you to catch a performance of a Water Puppet show but, come on, do you really have to see it? Yes, you do. You'll spend the first half of the performance marvelling at the sight of brightly colored wooden puppets dancing across, diving through, and bobbing in the water. And you'll spend the second half trying to figure out how the puppet masters do it. The feat is astonishing, both in terms of technology and artistry, but perhaps that's not surprising, given that the Vietnamese have been perfecting it for a thousand years.

### **Reunification Park**

Although Hanoi is a city of lakes and parks, it's not known as a place where one can truly enjoy the outdoors. It feels too congested for that. But Reunification Park, at the southern end of the central part of the city, does offer a bit of respite from Hanoi's noise and traffic. Constructed around a lake, but offering plenty of space for gardens, playgrounds, and amusements for children, Reunification Park is the place to go to spend a pleasant afternoon, particularly during the weekend, when Hanoi families will be out in force. Not many tourists visit, but it's a great place to go if you want to know what Hanoians do when they're not working. Also, if you're traveling with children, they'll love that you brought them here. For a kid, the little train ride around the lake or a passage through the House of Mirrors (if they're open) are worth the visit.