

Binh Tay Market and Cho Lon, Ho Chi Minh City

Though it's not in the center of town, Ho Chi Minh City's Chinese quarter, Cho Lon (which, in Vietnamese, means "Big Market"), has long been the financial heart of the city. The Binh Tay Market is a huge and rambling, but also elegant, example of French-era architecture. It's fascinating to wander the streets in this area, where you may hear spoken as much Chinese as Vietnamese. You're likely to come across shops selling herbal medicine, old men playing mysterious card games, and hundred-year-old Chinese pagodas, from the ceilings of which hang coiled incense, which burns for days and makes the atmosphere both fragrant and heavenly.

The Imperial Tomb of Minh Mang, Hue

On a quick run through Hue, travellers mostly focus on the Imperial Forbidden City and the Tomb of the Emperor Tu Duc (neither of which should be missed) but many of the other imperial tombs are worth a visit. The Tomb of Minh Mang (1820 to 1840), 12 kilometres down the Perfume River from Hue, beautifully incorporates its architecture into the natural surroundings of hills, streams, and forest. These days, the 160-year-old monument has become overgrown and somewhat spooky, and feels a little like a secret garden.

Xom Bong Bridge, Nha Trang

If you visit Nha Trang, you're likely to cross this bridge, either on your way to the Po Nagar Cham Towers or on your way into or out of town. Still, the view from this bridge, a bay dotted with islands and full of tiny, basket-shaped fishing boats bobbing in the deep, blue water, is one of the most beautiful in Vietnam. If you plan ahead (hire a bike, ask your driver to park, or wear comfortable shoes so that you can walk from the Cham Towers), you can make a stop on the bridge itself and look for as long as you like. Otherwise, one blink and you'll miss it.

A Train Ride

It's gotten so easy to hire a car with a driver, or to get together with friends to rent a van, or to fly, that many people skip the Vietnamese trains entirely. That's a shame. Nothing can give you a clearer feel for the expanse of the country, and nothing can bring a traveller closer to local people, than sitting among them on a train. In some strange and miraculous way, a train ride can make friends out of people who don't share a single common word, and an astonishing amount of information can actually be communicated during card games, over shared food, and through mime. If you don't have much time, buy a ticket between Hue and Danang (the fast train is about 3 hours). Though you'll miss the spectacular heights of a drive over the famous Hai Van Pass, you'll still see gorgeous scenery and you'll get to share it with Vietnamese. For more intrepid travellers, consider making an all-day, or all night excursion, say, from Hue to Hanoi. By day, you get to see the view. By night, you save on hotels and get to sleep in motion.

A Visit to a Pagoda on a Full Moon or New Moon Night

You may not make it to Vietnam for Tet, but you'd have to be pretty unlucky to miss either a full or new moon festival, which take place every two weeks. It doesn't much matter what pagoda you choose to visit, though you might want to get

recommendations from someone who knows which ones attract the liveliest crowds. Try to visit at dusk or early evening, when the young people tend to congregate like revellers at a disco, managing to pray and flirt at the same time. If you feel like praying yourself (and many foreigners do) you'll find vendors (mostly women) selling whatever you need for offerings: fruit, flowers, incense, votive papers, and various small religious objects. Don't worry if you don't know what you're doing. Someone will quickly offer to help.

Villages in the Red River Delta

These ancient villages surrounding Hanoi seem almost unchanged from how they looked a hundred years ago, or more. And if the occasional motorbike didn't whiz by, or if you didn't hear the rumble of someone's television, or see a young girl walk past in bell bottoms, you might be able to imagine that you had, indeed, stepped back in time. The traditional family home in these villages is actually a series of small, airy buildings constructed around a central courtyard. In addition to these compounds, most villages also have a local meeting hall, a village well (often a lotus pond with a wall around it), a pagoda or temple, and various other public spaces. You're likely to find such villages if you head out of Hanoi in any direction, but some of the most beautiful are the ones that contain the area's revered pagodas, such as Thay Pagoda, Mia Pagoda, and Tay Pagoda. For more information, specifically, on Thay and Mia, see Dana's article on **Chua Mia and Chua Thay**. http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.642.html