

# TRAVEL BITES THROUGH VIETNAM

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The road to the real Vietnam runs through its kitchens and markets. On a recent gastronomic quest to savor as much of the country's rich and varied cuisine as possible, I found modes of transport every bit as diverse as the nation's menus. These included a train ride on the historic Reunification Express from Saigon to Phan Thiet, and a side-car journey on a vintage red motorcycle, cruising mountain roads past pungent tea and coffee plantations, navigating narrow byways where the only impediments to our passage were squawking chickens and the lone little goat shepherd tending his flock. Passing the occasional village schoolchildren dressed in blue and white uniforms, their waves and smiles were as welcome as the warm tropical air.



Colonial Opera House Theater, Saigon.

## SAIGON:

My journey begins in sultry Saigon, where, from my Caravelle Hotel room window, I look down upon a conglomeration of buildings that can easily be described as a historian's hotbed of lore and legend. Laid out before me is the colonial French Opera House, built in 1911 during the country's occupation. A crosswalk away, the Continental Hotel of Graham Greene's Quiet American fame stands opposite the equally notable Rex Hotel, whose Rooftop Garden terrace became known in the '60s as the site of the "five o'clock follies." Here, during the Vietnam War, (called the American War by the Vietnamese) reporters and American military would gather at the end of the day to drink, debrief and deliver daily war dispatches. In those turbulent times, the surrounding blocks housed brassy bars boasting go-go girls at the beck and call of off-duty GIs. Today's replacements, pricey haute couture shops, cafes and intimate dining establishments, reflect Saigon's new-grown prosperity.

To my delight, I'm right at home in the Caravelle's Asian Reflections Restaurant. Vintage photos of old Saigon grace the walls; the dinner menu serves up fusion cuisine that merges Western dishes with traditional Vietnamese specials. On my first evening, I dine on spring rolls, papaya salad and wok-cooked beef tenderloin, the perfect way to ease a tender palate into an Asian frame of mind.

**Lee Daley - Travel Writer / Photographer**

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On a walking tour of the city the next day, I jump in head first. Restaurant Quan An Ngon, across the street from the Presidential Palace, has been recommended by an expat friend. The outdoor/indoor garden style venue offers an opportunity to sample various street foods in an authentic setting without the worry of food safety. Designed like a village, with an open-air dining area in the middle, former street food vendors work at individual cooking stalls encircling the perimeter of the restaurant. The concept showcases the “best of street food” in a restaurant setting. As I make my way to one of the few remaining seats, I notice what looks like a smattering of tourists and expats mixed amidst the hordes of locals. Choosing from the menu with the help of the waiter, I order an appetizer of lotus rhizome with shrimp and pork followed by a vermicelli entree with grilled pork and spring rolls.

A simple dressing, light and fragrant, enhances the shrimp appetizer. Refreshed, I dive into the main dish. The crispy spring roll, accompanied by a mildly tangy sauce, contrasts well against the mild vermicelli and complements the sweet grilled pork and soothing bun. One of the defining principles of Vietnamese cooking says the objective is to let the flavors unfold in the mouth-- as opposed to Western cooking which strives to bring out the flavors in the pot. I’m beginning to understand.

Next morning, realizing I’ll need fortification for the early morning train departure to Phan Thiet, I head for the Caravelle’s lobby eatery called Nineteen. Beautifully arranged along an S-shaped serving line, the buffet’s array of flaky French pastries, hot American basics, Japanese specialties, and fragrant Vietnamese vegetables, fruits and condiments is a feast for the eyes. Included is Vietnam’s national dish, Pho. A traditional noodle soup, sometimes spiced with a drop or two of fish sauce ((nuoc mam,) it is a bargain in a bowl with its clear broth, finely minced meat, aromatic herbs and roasted shallots..



Saigon Vendor Serving Wok Dish Recipe

Serves six.

Ingredients:

1 lb 4 oz “Pho” noodles

10 oz Beef bones

250g Beef rump or eye of round

3.5 oz (100 g) Beef fillet (optional)

1.2 oz (15g) Shallots

3/4 oz (20g) Old ginger

1 unit Star anise

2 cm Cinnamon stick

1 pod Black Cardamon

2 Limes

2 oz (60 g) Green onion

Fresh herbs

Peppermint, coriander, sawtooth coriander,  
Nuoc mam, fresh chili, salt, ground  
pepper

Traditional “pho” noodle soup with beef:  
From: Didier Corlou’s “Vietnamese Cuisine” Printing House: Nha in Bao Quan Doi Nhan dan II.

#### Preparation:

- Wash the bones and the meat thoroughly. Pat the pieces of fillet with absorbent paper.
- Roast the ginger and shallots. Dry the star anise and black cardamom and slightly crush them. Put everything in a piece of clean cloth together with the cinnamon and tie well.
- Start making the stock with six pints (three liters) of cold water, put in the beef bones and cook on a brisk heat. When it comes to a boil, skim. Reduce heat to low. Add the spices bundle and the piece of rump steak. Season with nuoc man and salt. Simmer over a slow heat for about 2 1/2 hours. Take the spices out when the stock has become fragrant enough.
- Take out the bones and meat. Hang the meat to drain and dry it well. Keep the stock boiling.
- Adjust seasoning. Slice the herbs, the green onion and the beef.
- Poach the pho noodles in boiling water for two seconds, divide it in individual bowls. Arrange the meat in each bowl, herbs and onion on top. Pour the stock.
- Serve very hot with a little lemon juice; sliced chili or chili sauce.

#### Note:

- For pho with rare beef, slice the raw beef fillet just before serving, marinate it with a little ginger, poach it in a ladle full of stock. Then pour all the beef and stock from the ladle in each bowl on the noodles and herbs.
- In some Vietnamese pho restaurants, spuncules (sea worms) dried in a skillet without fat, are added while making the stock to enhance the taste.
- Asian food markets in most cities stock staples such as fish sauce and dried white noodles on their shelves. A good brand of fish sauce is Viet Huong's Three Crabs.



Reunification Express

## PHAN THIET

Starting out in Saigon, the Reunification Express meanders north the length of the country never more than 60 miles from the coast. Four hours from departure in Saigon I arrive in Phan Thiet where my ride to Ocean Dunes Resort awaits. The simple pleasure of watching Vietnam's rural landscape float past from the comfort of my train seat provides a wonderful transition from Saigon's big city bustle to this small fishing port packed with colorful boats, More than 100 different varieties of fishes are caught here; thus, Phan Thiet is the major source of fish sauce (nuoc mam) for the entire country.

Ocean Dunes Resort overlooks one of the longest stretches of private beach in the country. Apart from the main 123-room resort, a small complex of villas and private rooms faces a large lawn perched at the edge of the sea. I decide upon the more private setting and when I look out at the ocean view from my ground floor deck, I know I've made the right decision. Broad French doors lead from the deck into a spacious room cooled by dark mahogany floors and a ceiling fan. Lush potted palms in the solarium-style bathroom add to the tropical feel.

Late that afternoon, on an exploratory drive through some of the surrounding fishing villages, I head inland a bit away from the beach and encounter a most unusual eco-system. Dozens of entrepreneurial kids wave and offer rides on plastic sleds. Behind them I see sprawling red sand dunes. It's a scene reminiscent of a North African desert. Grabbing one young girl's hand as she pulls her sled with the other, we trudge to the top of the tallest peak in time to witness a flaming sunset silhouette dozens of visitors against the vast horizon. Caught up in the moment, I accept my new friend's invitation, hop aboard her plastic sled and together we slide down the sandy slope. A new mode of transport is added to my list.



Red Sand Dunes at Phan Thiet

### **DALAT:**

What could be finer than sand dune coasting? Why, the aforementioned motorcycle side-car ride, of course. Not far from Ocean Dunes, the newly opened Princess D'Annan Resort has added another layer of luxury to its amenities: chauffeured day trips aboard vintage motorcycle side-cars with an experienced driver. An exhilarating ride from Phan Thiet to Dalat offers a chance to view the countryside from a new vantage point. I'm in love with the concept and the reality is even better.



Sidecar Journey

Vietnam's Kodachrome landscape of jade and emerald rice paddies languishes before us as my English-speaking driver buzzes the BMW bike north into the country's Central Highlands. Soon the aroma of coffee fills the air. Here in the highlands, coffee and tea plantations flourish. While Vietnamese tend to drink mostly tea, coffee is becoming increasingly popular and is a major export item. As we approach the former French colonial outpost of Dalat, the surrounding landscape of pine forests and dramatic peaks appears very Swiss. Once in town, it becomes even more European looking. Neatly spaced two-story frame houses festooned with blossom-filled flower boxes line the streets. A mini version of the Eiffel Tower- the town's communication tower- attests to Dalat's former moniker. Le Petit Paris. Atop the tower, Vietnam's flag- bright red with a yellow star- flutters victoriously.

If, in your travels in Vietnam, you find yourself becoming road weary and in need of long walks in fresh mountain air, Dalat offers that and more. Some 200 miles northeast of Saigon on a plateau 5,000 feet about sea level, Da Lat was once inhabited by hill tribes, wild boar, deer and elephants. As early as 1900, French officials envisioned the area as a refuge from the stifling heat of Saigon's summers. To entice affluent visitors, they planned a palace resort worthy of the rich and famous.

When it opened in 1922, a deluxe suite went for today's equivalent of \$200. It attracted maharajahs, kings, and writers such as Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward. The town prospered for some time until the great Depression when Dalat Palace, as it was then called, fell on hard times. During the 30s it remained open, mostly unoccupied and unloved. Then, in 1993 American Larry Hillblom, co-founder of DHL, rediscovered it and spent a king's ransom on restoration.

The magnificent Sofitel Dalat Palace Hotel overlooks serene Xuan Huong Lake, A vintage 1955 Citroen remains parked at the foot of the grand staircase leading to the hotel's entry. But the draw for me is the hotel's Le Rabelais Restaurant, where for a relative pittance, one can dine like a princess. The Palace has recently retained Didier Corlou, the longtime executive chef at the Sofitel Metropole in Hanoi, as Consulting Chef. The Brittany native, whose 2004 book, "Vietnamese Cuisine" won that year's Gourmand Award for Best Asian Cuisine Book, has prepared dinner for Presidents Bill Clinton and Jacques Chirac. To my palate, this presents an opportunity to experience a menu designed by Vietnam's most celebrated chef.



Sofitel Dalat Palace Hotel

As luck would have it, Corlou is on hand that day consulting with resident chef, Nguyen Huu Huong. I am to receive the benefit of two toques for the price of one.

Meeting the Great One is an honor. "I have been coming to Dalat for ten years," he tells me. "I come for the spirit of the gardens and for all these vegetables - the avocados, the big fat carrots, the French bamboo, the long-stemmed artichokes. So much is here. These are my passions and Dalat will feed those passions while I feed the guests at the Palace." Among the dishes I enjoy are Crab Flower stuffed with Two Flower Crisps, Duck with Oranges, and Stuffed Baby Spinach and pumpkin flower with Crab "

and pumpkin flower with Crab “Nectar.”

Resident Chef Huong, Le Rabelais Restaurant



This is Part I of a two part series. In Part II, Travel Bites to Vietnam continues on to Hoi An, Hue and Hanoi.

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