

VIETNAM on a plate

BY KATE ARMSTRONG

One of Asia's great food destinations, Vietnam tantalises with steaming bowls of noodle soup and melt-in-your-mouth pastries. Whatever you order, you'll likely find a few surprises.

The challenge is on: "Let's test, Billy!" exclaim our young Vietnamese guides, referring to my travelling companion. The four of us – myself, Billy and the two girls, Ngoc and Huyen – enter a tiny corner café and grab seats at a wooden table. The girls order. Out comes a bowl of soup, in which float small, elongated chunks of an unidentifiable ingredient. The taste test begins.

Hours before, Ngoc and Huyen, had discovered that they're showing their city to a foodie guru, former Australian *MasterChef* contestant Billy Law. Delighted, they devise a task: we must find a local ingredient Billy can't identify. Not only is it a fun exercise; it's a great way for me – a first-time visitor to Vietnam – to experience the best of local street food along with the sights.

The night before, we'd arrived in Hanoi at peak hour, when most of the city's 6.5-million residents seem to be heading home. Surrounding our bus are thousands of motorbikes; a sea of helmets stretches

ahead like bobbing buoys; horns blast a city-fied symphony. We inch our way down the wide, tree-lined boulevards, past the pastel-yellow buildings of the French quarter – a legacy of Gallic occupation from the late 1800s until WWII. Badly damaged by American bombing during the Vietnam War, many buildings have since been renovated.

We'd passed Hanoi Opera House, a grand Neoclassical affair, and the upmarket Sofitel Legend Metropole where, over a cocktail or a US\$70 brunch, visitors can channel their inner Graham Greene or Jane Fonda, just two of the hotel's illustrious past guests.

Here, hole-in-the-wall eateries line the pavements. Steam wafts from large pots. Food hawkers in conical hats push trolleys laden with everything from rugs to egg trays. In doorways, men suck on long pipes, the traditional "cigarettes" of Vietnam. The air is thick with a sour humidity; herbs, oil and fumes mingle. Overhead, a tangle of wires reflects the city's organised chaos.



There's no time to waste. I plunge into the Old Quarter, or 36 Streets, a jumble of narrow roads and alleyways known as *hang* (merchandise). Back in the 13th century, Hanoi's three dozen guilds operated here, each selling some type of specialty good: fish or leather, pipes or sandals. These days, they're crammed with hawkers and shops selling everything from traditional kitchenware to trendy designer t-shirts.

I amble past Hang Ma, where imitation "ghost money" is sold for Buddhist ceremonies, and although I can smell the herb shops – spicy aromas waft through the alleys – I can't locate them.

The next morning, we visit Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, a massive communist-style construction with wide steps and a large concrete plaza. Here lies the body of Ho Chi Minh, the revered revolutionary leader who led the country's independence movement against French colonial rule. A long line of visitors snakes around the building. We move forward slowly; a guard puts his fingers to his lips to indicate that silence, and solemnity, is required.

Inside, Ho Chi Minh lies in a softly lit glass sarcophagus. He is

dressed in a dark uniform, and his pointed white beard makes him easily identifiable. Our guide tells us: "When he died, everybody cried for a week, like their father had died."

I need a coffee to get my head around this experience, not to mention the country's complex history. And Hanoi is just the place to enjoy a brew; the city is full of small coffee shops and the aroma of roasting beans. Vietnam follows a strong, traditional coffee culture. Here, coffee is not a quick fix; it must be lingered over – ask the many government workers who arrive at the office, only to head out the door to meet over steaming beverages.

Billy introduces me to *ca phe sua*, white coffee. This strong, filtered brew drips delectably slowly into your glass via a simple filter, landing in a strip of sweet condensed milk. It tastes (and feels) like melted toffee. But Billy's on the hunt for an egg-based coffee (*ca phe trung*) and to find it, he's secured the help of Ngoc and Huyen.

They lead us through a silk shop into a labyrinth of rooms and up a winding staircase to the top-floor verandah of Café



HEAD OVER EELS

Clockwise from above: Fried noodles with eel; coffee topped with whipped egg tastes better than it sounds; outside Hanoi's Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum.

Opening spread: Fruits for sale in a local market.



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Pho Co. The city's landmark, Hoan Kiem Lake, spreads before us, as do hundreds of adolescents who cruise around the lake's circumference on motorbikes, jostling for road space with cars and pedicabs.

We sip on black coffee topped with whipped egg white, which gives it a cool, creamy froth. I don't catch its name but Billy declares it tastes like tiramisu.

We pass an hour chatting about Vietnamese food. That's when Ngoc and Huyen, self-professed "good cooks," realise that Billy knows his stuff.

Billy's taste test is set; we agree to exclude some local delicacies, including snake, from which you can create an astounding 11 dishes – the "beating heart" dish is allegedly an aphrodisiac.

For the entire afternoon, we follow Ngoc and Huyen through the streets. Our first stop is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it café with no sign, up a small alleyway. We perch awkwardly on kindergarten-sized plastic chairs; the female owner whips us up *cacao trung*, an energy-packed eggnog flavoured with Milo chocolate, as well as *hoa qua dam*, fruit salad with ice and coconut milk. The girls ask Billy to name the fruits: avocado, papaya, jackfruit, mango and custard apple, typical of those you see and smell piled up at the local markets. For Billy, it's an easy task. "Billy good!" they giggle, and set their minds on something more challenging.

We emerge into the bustling Old Quarter; it's even busier now. Tourists spill out of cafés onto the pavement, sipping on *bia hoi*, beer. A woman proffers a large basket of Vietnamese *banh ran* (donuts), some covered in sesame seeds. Elsewhere, stalls sell *bun cha* (barbequed sliced pork with vermicelli, herbs and



BOWLED OVER

Above: Billy taking part in the eel soup taste-test.



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vegetables) and *banh mi*, a baguette with fillings of your choice.

At a streetside cart, we pause for chunks of roasted piglet served on a leaf “plate.” The meat is moist and tender with a golden, crispy skin. Juice trickles down our chins.

The girls are delighted by our enthusiasm at sampling their street food, if disappointed by Billy’s sublime knowledge. The test continues: up a tiny dank corridor, we nibble on *nem chua*, small parcels of fermented pork, each wrapped in a banana leaf and labelled with a white piece of paper. It’s another walkover for Billy.

We move on to the corner café. Here, Billy must face his most challenging taste test: the “chunks” floating in a bowl of vermicelli noodles. The girls are convinced they’ve picked an impossible mission. Billy handles his chopsticks with dexterity. He nibbles. He slurps. He ponders.

He is concentrating hard. The girls giggle, anticipating victory.

“Eel!” announces Billy confidently.

He nails it.

The girls’ faces fall; they are astounded at this Malaysian-Australian gourmet. “He good!” they repeat. “Now in Vietnamese?” they joke. (For the record, *mien luon* are eel noodles and *mien luon xao* are fried eel noodles).

Early the following morning, realising I must break free from the safety of Billy’s tastebuds, I hit the streets to have breakfast on my own. Here, breakfast means *pho bo* (beef noodle soup) or *pho ga* (chicken noodle soup), a satisfying stocky broth poured over noodles to which you add chilli, lime and bean sprouts.

I follow instructions to eat where the locals do. I join a queue. When my turn arrives, I prop myself on a tiny wooden stool at one of five tin-topped tables. I’m surprised when my neighbour, a businessman, says in broken English: “These noodles are the best around. The taste is good.” He’s right.

Sated by savoury flavours, I need a sugary hit. Luckily for me, this is easy. I trek back to the Old Quarter to café Kinh Do 252, where Catherine Deneuve was a regular customer during the filming of *Indochine* in Hanoi – the wall features a film poster with a signed photograph of Deneuve stuck to it.

I can’t decide between a croissant and a *tarte au chocolat* (chocolate tart). I have both. At 20,000 dong (about AU\$1) each, it’s a far cry from its pricey Parisian equivalents and equally as delectable. And few French bakehouses can boast having a 95-year-old at the helm as Kinh Do can.

“This is my life,” says Le Huu Chi in a thick French accent. “When people come here, I am very happy. I have a good memory and I know them. If I don’t open this, I stay in a room and watch TV. No good! Friends mean long life.”

A few meals later, I think of Ngoc and Huyen, Billy’s Vietnamese “judges” and our newfound friends. I can’t wait to tell them that Billy has finally been caught out. At lunch one day, he struggles to identify a zingy, spade-shaped herb served on a dish that got lost in translation. It takes days to discover it’s just *diep ca*, fish mint.

Billy is pleased to add an item to his repertoire. I’m happy, too, if only to have enjoyed a taste of this extraordinary country. •

Photography by Kate Armstrong.

MAI WAY

Above: Hanoi has a strong café culture thanks to its colonial heritage.



travel facts

GETTING THERE

Vietnam Airlines flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. 61-2/9283-9658; vietnamairlines.com

GETTING AROUND

- Kumuka Worldwide. 1300-667-277; kumuka.net.au
- Travel Indochina. 1300-365-355; travelindochina.com.au
- Wendy Wu Tours. 1300-727-998; wendywutours.com.au

WHEN TO GO

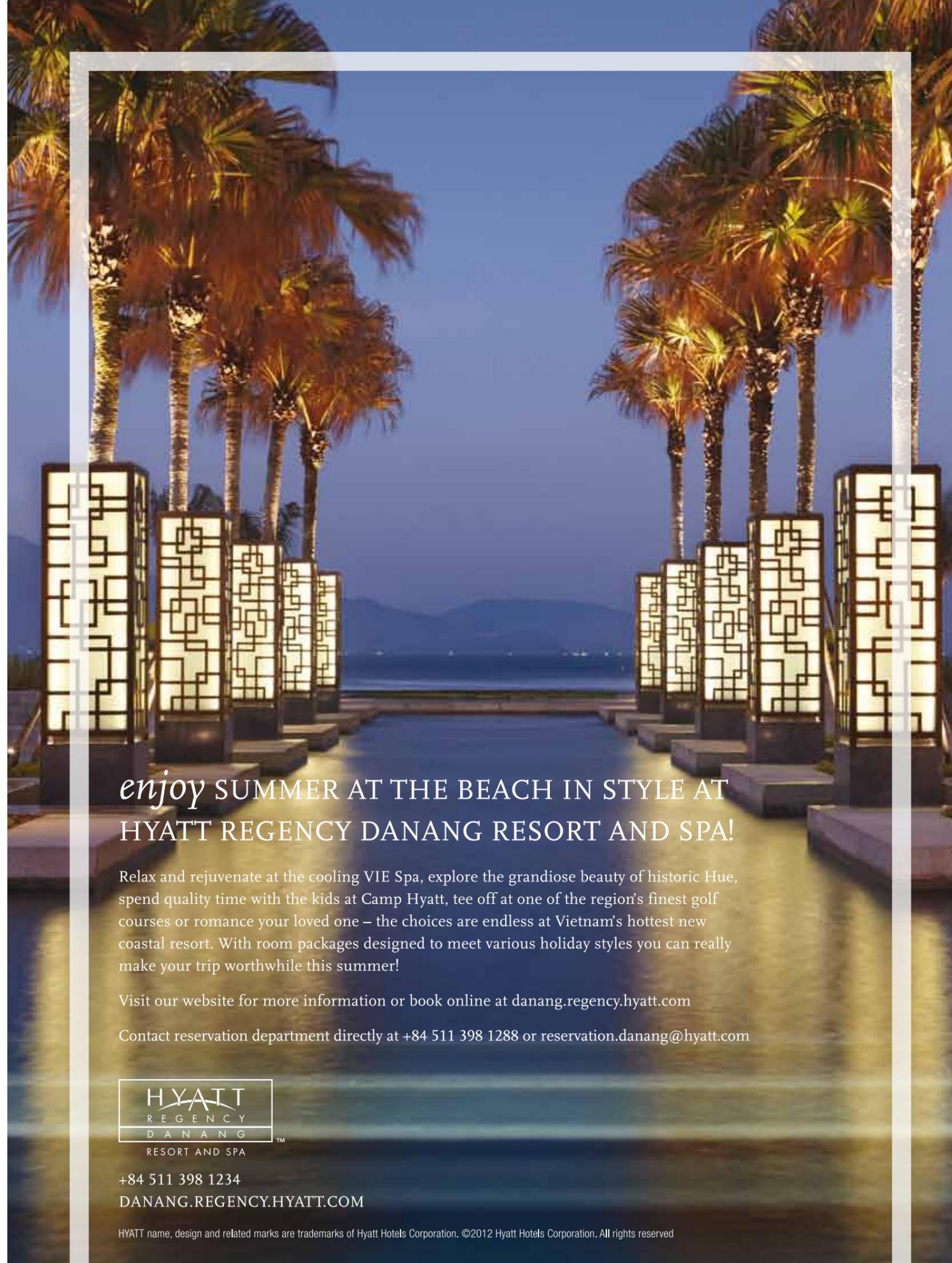
Vietnam is a long country with substantial climatic variation from north to south. Weather conditions at any given time fluctuate between hot, monsoonal and cool. The dry season in Hanoi is from October to April.

WHERE TO STAY

- Chen Sea Resort & Spa, Phu Quoc. 66-2/101-1234; centarahotelsresorts.com
- Hyatt Regency Danang. 84-511/398-1234; danang.regency.hyatt.com
- Hotel Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi. 84-4/3826-6919; sofitel.com
- Park Hyatt Saigon. 84-4/3824-1234; saigon.park.hyatt.com
- Victoria Hotels & Resorts. victoriahotels.asia

FURTHER INFORMATION

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