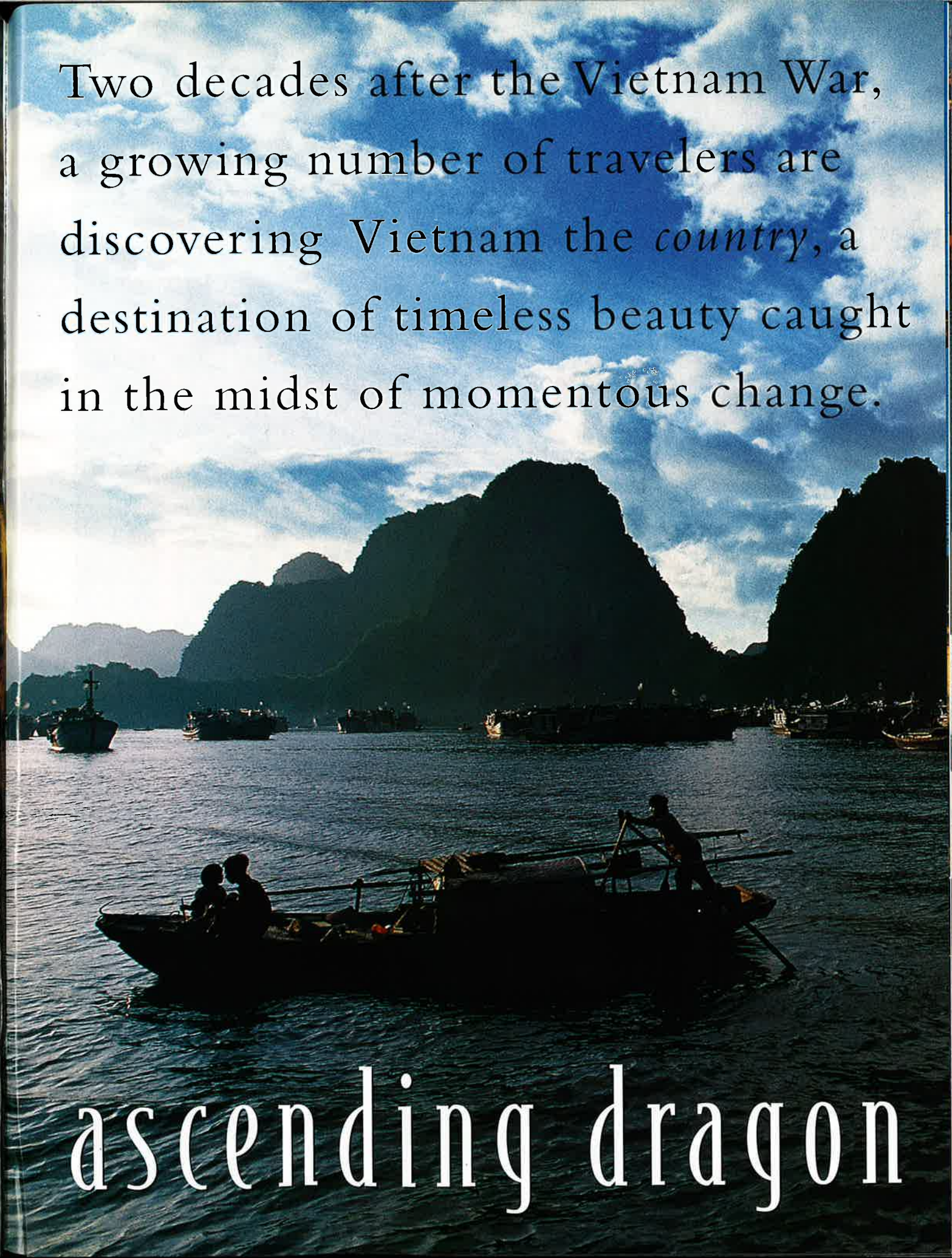


Past and present meet in Hanoi's Old Quarter, where a vendor in a traditional conical hat sells the latest millinery. Halong Bay fishermen (right) still follow their centuries-old way of life.



Two decades after the Vietnam War, a growing number of travelers are discovering Vietnam the *country*, a destination of timeless beauty caught in the midst of momentous change.



Land of the ascending dragon

The well-traveled Peugeot labored up the winding stretch of National Highway 1 north of Danang, along the central coast of Vietnam. We were climbing toward Hai Van Pass, the Pass of the Ocean Clouds, in the mountains that cut across Vietnam's



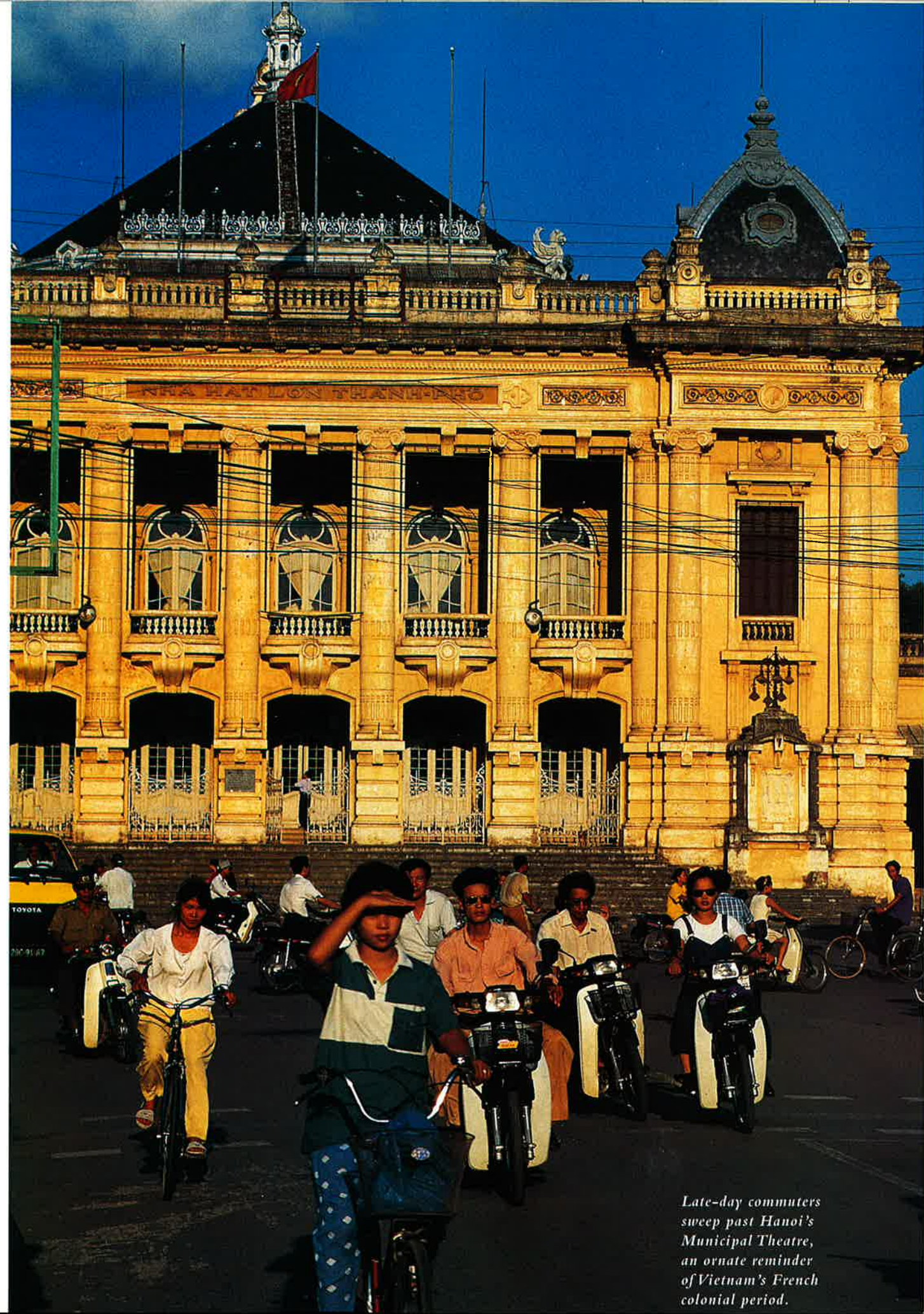
Today's Hanoi (top to bottom): Hoan Kiem Lake provides a serene setting for morning exercises; with economic freedom on the rise, youths stride toward a more promising future; an artist captures the Temple of Literature, founded in 1070; Ho Chi Minh look-alike visits Ho's wartime home.



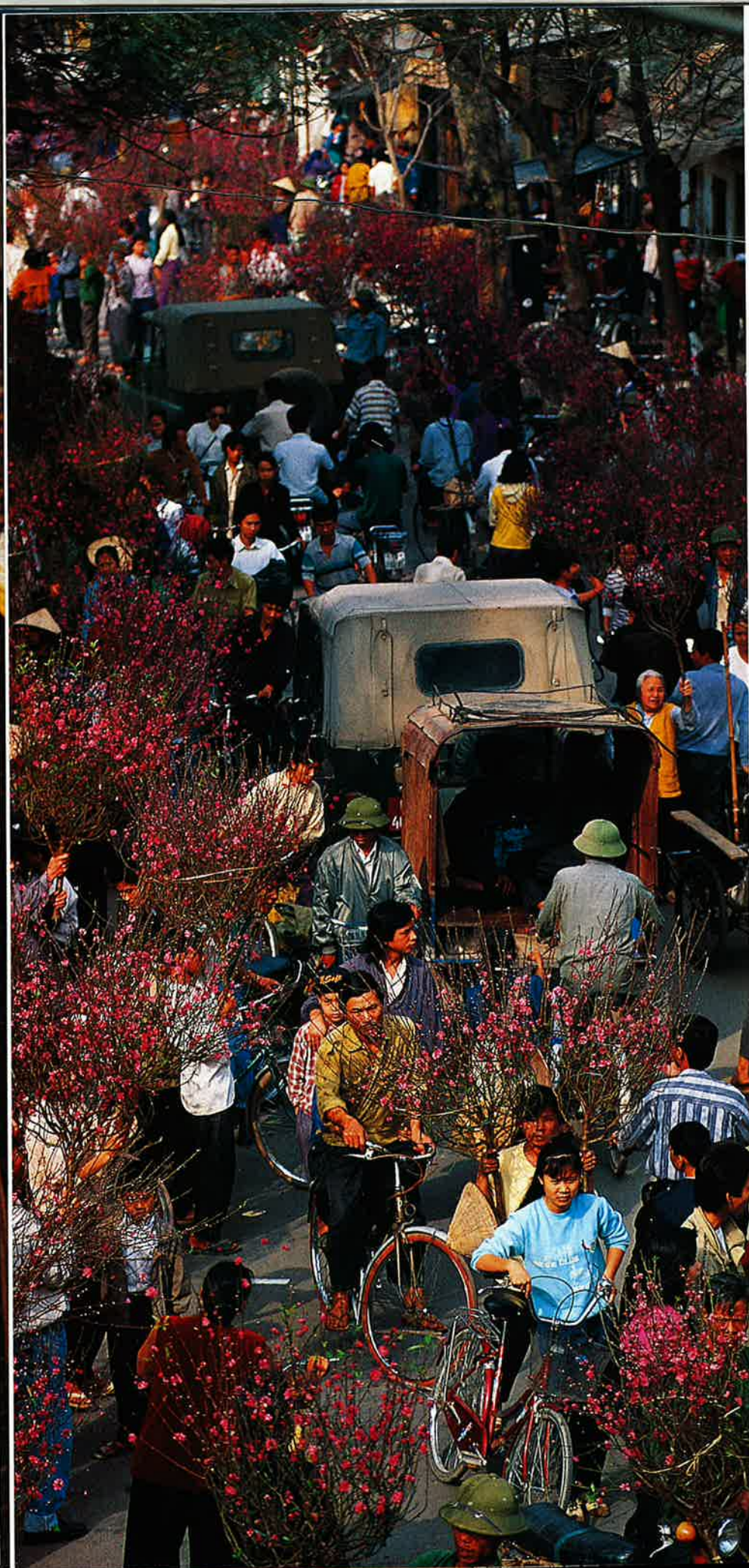
skinny midsection, separating the steamy southern half of this thousand-mile-long country from the cooler north.

As we approached a scenic overlook, I asked my guide and translator, Giang, to tell the driver to stop. I climbed from the car to look down on Lang Co Peninsula, a strip of pale sand set off by a turquoise lagoon and the blue-green South China Sea. A deserted, palm-shaded beach stretched off to the north.

In the drowsy town of Lang Co just below, the stark white spire of an old Catholic church provided a ready landmark.



Late-day commuters sweep past Hanoi's Municipal Theatre, an ornate reminder of Vietnam's French colonial period.



Moments after I got out of the car, three child peddlers appeared, holding trays of goods and shouting, "You buy, you buy." I'd grown so used to saying no—no to trinkets, gum, postcards, headache salve, what have you—that I almost failed to notice the antique silver coin one girl held out. It was the size and heft of a silver dollar. On one side were the words "Indo-Chine Française Piastre de Commerce." On the other, a female figure sat above the date, 1896.

It dawned on me that what this girl was actually offering was a totem of her country's stormy history over the past one hundred years. During that coin's existence, the Vietnamese had fought the French, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Cambodians, and, of course, the Americans.

Photographer Steve Raymer and I had been two of those Americans. Now we were returning to see this country in a new light—at peace, as its welcome guests. In fact, at times I was amazed by the warmth of my reception. It seemed that everyone I met had mastered the seven-word phrase, "Hello how are you where you from?" (Westerners are still enough of a novelty to provoke constant stares, and the Vietnamese can be surprisingly direct. Once, a woman walked up to me, prodded my stomach, and pronounced, "Beaucoup bia—Lots of beer.")

I gave the young peddler her asking price, one U.S. dollar, and pocketed the coin. It would be my lucky charm for the rest of a 16-day journey from Hanoi south to Ho Chi Minh City (lusty old Saigon). My trip would be filled with nostalgia, a few uneasy memories, and revelations galore.

For one thing, I would see why this country—slightly larger than Italy and with a population of 73 million—has been called one of the world's most beautiful. Mountains and hills predominate, with the verdant Truong Son Range running nearly the length of the land. Virginal beaches and quiet lagoons dot the coast. And from the Red River Delta in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south, the eye struggles to sort out the incredible range of greens among the lush patchwork of rice fields.

Lucky coin or not, good fortune seemed to await me at every turn during those two weeks. Take my first tee shot at King's Island Golf Resort 28 miles west of Hanoi—a 250-yard beauty down the center of the fairway.

Golf? In Vietnam? That's what I thought when I heard about this Thai development, part of a building boom fueled by foreign investors eager to jump into the free market that began opening here in 1986, when Vietnam's communist leaders eased the ham-fisted grip of central planning. A few weeks before I played King's Island, even Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet tried his hand at the imperialist pastime. "He had a pretty good swing," said Canadian Peter Jensen, the resort's construction manager.

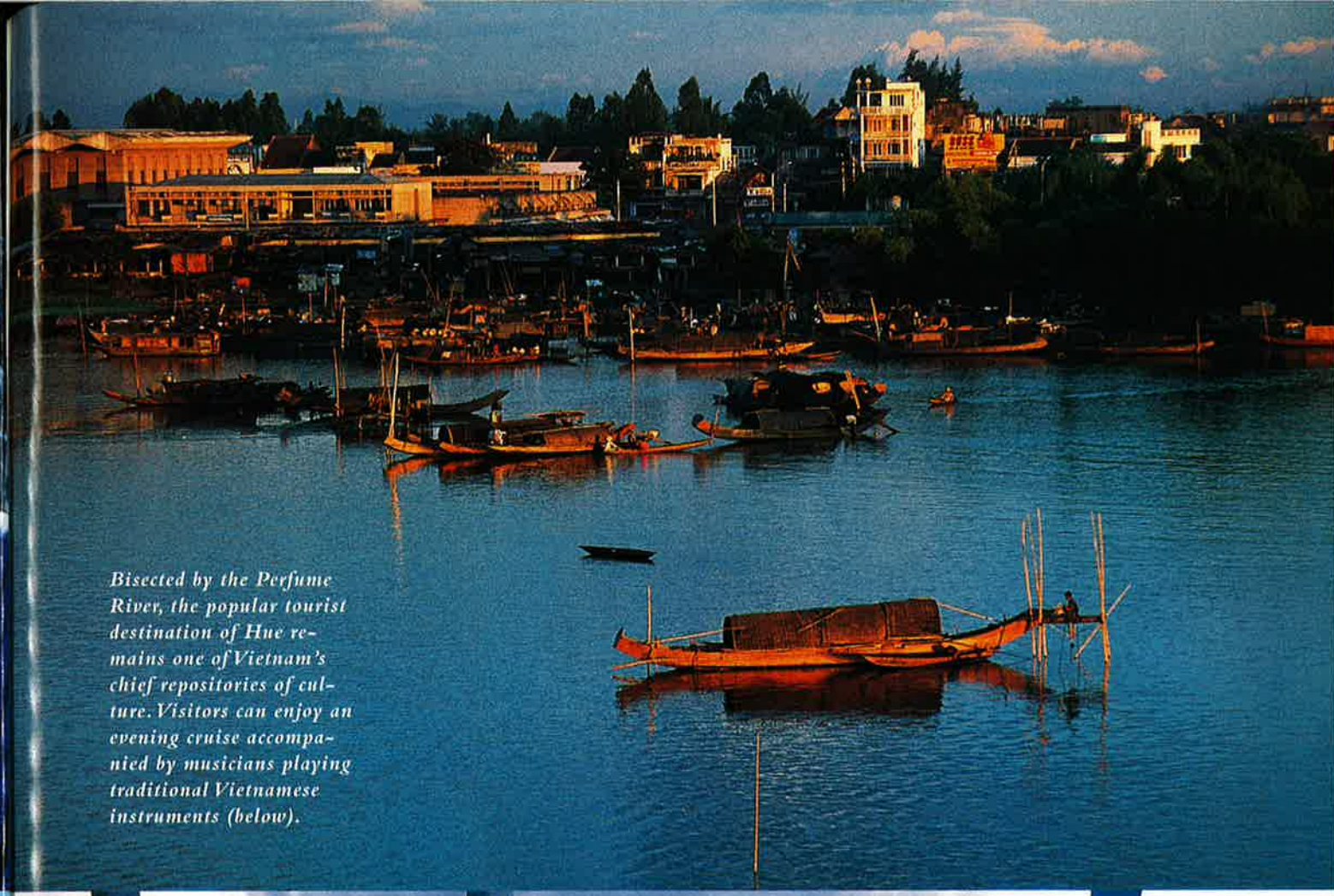
Members of the politburo with mashies in their hands—that's part of the new Vietnam, along with cities where construction cranes tower and hotels shoot up like bamboo. (Fortunately, the quality of accommodations is rising along with the numbers, though even with the frenzy of construction there are still too few hotel rooms to meet demand.)

Despite the country's rush toward the future, the venerable Vietnam is never far away, especially so in thousand-year-old Hanoi. Vestiges of the past waft throughout this lake-sprinkled city of 3.25 million on the banks of the Red River, whose tumbledown aspect is softened by shady parks and handsome public buildings of ocher stucco. Wide, tree-lined boulevards evoke the years when the city was the capital of French Indochina (1887-1954).

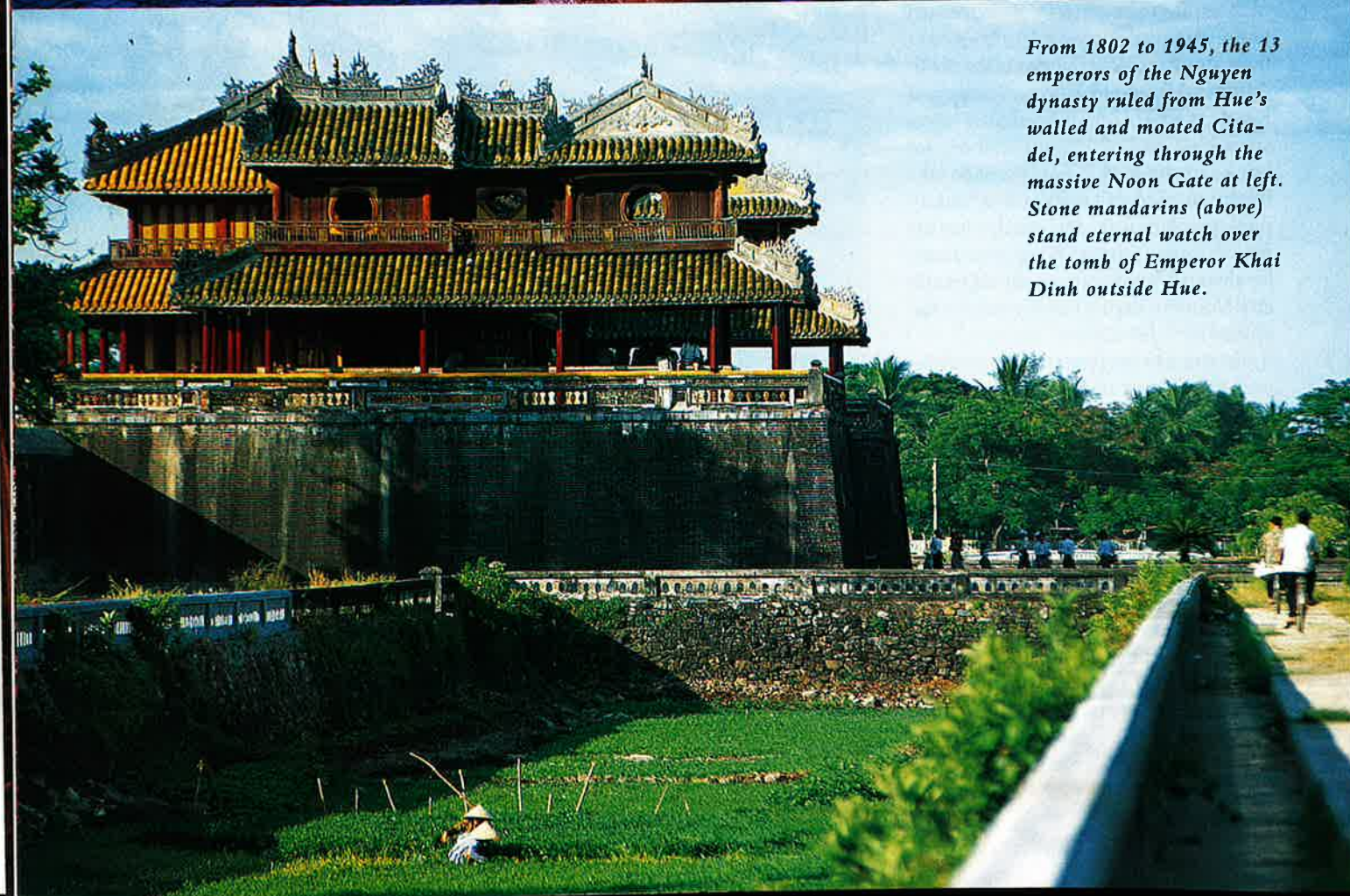
In the western part of Hanoi I visited the Temple of Literature, founded in the year 1070 to honor men of literary accomplishment. In 1076 this Confucian temple became the site of Vietnam's first university. Eighty-two large stone tablets, borne on the backs of fanciful stone tortoises, record the names and birthplaces of its scholars. As I wandered through the parklike grounds, beneath banyan and frangipani trees, past lotus ponds and pavilions with gracefully curving tile roofs, the wavering, hypnotic sounds of traditional Vietnamese musical instruments—a 16-stringed zither, a



Map: Susie Cooper; Photograph: David Alan Harvey (following page, top)



Bisected by the Perfume River, the popular tourist destination of Hue remains one of Vietnam's chief repositories of culture. Visitors can enjoy an evening cruise accompanied by musicians playing traditional Vietnamese instruments (below).



From 1802 to 1945, the 13 emperors of the Nguyen dynasty ruled from Hue's walled and moated Citadel, entering through the massive Noon Gate at left. Stone mandarins (above) stand eternal watch over the tomb of Emperor Khai Dinh outside Hue.



For one thing, I would see why this country...

haunting bamboo flute, the one-stringed *dan bau*—drifted through the walled complex, one of the regular performances here.

In the center of town, people congregate around pretty little Hoan Kiem Lake, much as they always have, to practice tai chi of a morning, to play chess or *da cau*—kick badminton—in the afternoon, or to flirt with the opposite sex at night. A small, serene temple, Ngoc Son, sits on a leafy island on the northeast side of the lake, reached by an arching red wooden footbridge. One evening I sat on a park bench near the temple, beneath a canopy of fragrant blossoms that drooped over the water. The lights of the city flickered on the surface of the lake, and the buzz of passing motorbikes and tooting car horns dispelled any notion that I was in a somnolent communist capital. The atmosphere was downright lively.

Just up the street from where I sat, the atmosphere is always festive. At Hanoi's renowned Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre, you'd have to be a hard-hearted soul to sit through an evening's performance without a smile on your face. The nine-century-old art, in which winsome puppets act out a series of scenes, is guilelessly charming. To the accompaniment of live music and singing, miniature golden dragons thrash about, plucky farm boys ride water buffalo, fishermen angle while butterflies flit over lily pads. For nearly an hour, fish leap, snakes wriggle, foxes pounce, and phoenixes frolic. I felt about 20 years drop away while I watched.

A few blocks east of Hoan Kiem Lake, I stopped by the city's artifact-filled History Museum, which sketches the evolution of Vietnam, including its thousand-year rule by the Chinese (111 B.C.—A.D. 938). I also visited two other reminders of Vietnamese history—one of which was all but gone, the other intended to last through the ages. At the former "Hanoi Hilton," the infamous prison for captured U.S. airmen, little remained but a pile

has been called one of the world's most beautiful.



Limpid waters wash Nha Trang's four-mile beach, one of Vietnam's finest. At Danang's Cham Museum (below), sculptures such as this stone elephant god show the artistic achievements of the Kingdom of Champa, which once held sway over present-day central Vietnam. Flower gardens brighten Dalat (opposite), a popular honeymoon spot in the Central Highlands.

of rubble. A new international office complex is going up on the central Hanoi site.

Just north of the Temple of Literature, all the pomp that the Vietnamese could muster was lavished on the tomb of Ho Chi Minh. With a group of Taiwanese, I queued up outside the imposing, multicolumned marble mausoleum. White-uniformed guards marshaled us along at a quickstep. Inside the refrigerated tomb, each of the Taiwanese bowed in respect at the foot of the glass coffin containing the preserved remains of modern Vietnam's founding father. When my turn came to stand briefly before the waxen white figure, I didn't know what to do. I nodded awkwardly and moved on.

Back outside in the welcome sunshine, I strolled the short distance to Ho Chi Minh's home during the war against the Americans, a two-room



wooden stilt-house on the grounds of the old French governor-general's mansion. Ho's house sits in a luxuriant garden on the edge of a pond filled with goldfish, which the Vietnamese leader fed each day until his death in 1969. There was irony in the image of that wispy old man waging war against the mightiest nation on earth from this place of Zen-like repose.

Before leaving Hanoi, I poked around in the Old Quarter, the city's

main shopping area, between Hoan Kiem Lake and the Red River. Dating from the 15th century, these narrow, crowded streets are named for the goods traditionally sold along them—Rice Street, Paper Street, Silk Street. At one point I must have stumbled into T-Shirt Street; an avalanche of shirts spilled from the row of open shop-fronts, each little wider than a car.

On Fried Fish Street I ate lunch at Cha Ca La Vong, a popular hole-in-the-wall café that's specialized in one dish for the past hundred years—chunks of seasoned fish that you cook yourself on a charcoal brazier, served with vermicelli and heaps of chopped greens and herbs. (Everywhere in Vietnam, the food was outstanding, from the traditional dishes of inexpensive eateries like Cha Ca La Vong to the international fare available in posh Saigon restaurants.)

Inside the Cu Chi Tunnels

I was prepared not to enjoy my day trip to the popular museum and underground exhibit in the rural district of Cu Chi, a former Vietcong stronghold 1½ hours by car northwest of Saigon. More wartime memorabilia, I said to myself. Who needed it? To my surprise, what I encountered there was an engrossing demonstration of human will and ingenuity.

Begun during the insurgency against the French in the late 1940s, the tunnel complex included living areas, kitchens, field hospitals, weapons factories, and storage rooms—all knitted together by a spiderweb of passageways hacked out of the hard, dry earth. The tunnels stretched for 200 miles, all the way from the Cambodian border to Saigon.

The Vietcong held out in this underground warren against bombing, napalm attacks, and sweeps by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops. It was from the tunnels that VC guerrillas infiltrated Saigon during the momentous Tet Offensive of 1968.

One American unit, the 25th Infantry Division, happened to build a base camp over part of the network, and the soldiers were mystified at how the VC could snipe at them in their tents at night.

A section of the tunnels has been enlarged to accommodate bulky Westerners. With a Vietnamese Army guide, I scrambled down into the dimly lit burrow, which he told me measured twice its original dimensions of 15½ inches by 23½ inches. After duckwalking a few feet down the passageway, I stopped short. It was spooky down there, hot and still. The tunnel ahead looked like nothing more than a drainpipe. That's when my latent claustrophobia kicked in—and I had to get out, fast.

It was amazing to think that the tunnels went down two more levels, as deep as 30 feet below the surface. What a nightmare it must have been in there when bombs were raining down outside. If you admired nothing else about the Vietcong, after seeing this place, you had to salute their tenacity. —P.M.



Ever since I'd arrived in Hanoi, I'd been looking forward to making an overnight excursion to the recently designated world heritage site of Halong Bay, one of Asia's natural wonders. To reach this thousand-square-mile section of the Gulf of Tonkin, a hundred miles east of the capital, meant a hard drive over abominable roads. The good news was that the route led through a landscape of incomparable beauty, the green-on-green rice bowl of the Red River Delta.

Outside my window were scenes little changed in centuries—the slow-paced cycle of farmers stooping to plant their flooded fields, children astride plodding water buffalo, women in conical hats, or *non la*, endlessly dipping buckets in irrigation ditches. On the crowded road we passed two-wheeled carts pulled by

Brahman cows, and rickety buses filled to overflowing, the passengers' baskets of belongings lashed to the rooftops. Every so often we drove over brown carpets of rice—the latest harvest, spread along the highway to dry before milling.

After five hours, and only one flat tire (another enlivened our return trip), our Toyota bounced into the coastal town of Bai Chay, the main port for cruises on Halong Bay, which extends north to the Chinese

border. Out in the bay I could see some of the 3,000 limestone islands that cluster here like a range of miniature mountains. Eroded into fantastic shapes, the islands are often swathed in fog. Many are riddled with caves. A good part of Cat Ba, one of the larger islands—known for its fine forests, lakes, and beaches—is protected by a national park.

During a four-hour cruise I sailed to Hang Luon, an uninhabited island with a secret at its heart. As the two-dozen-passenger tour boat *Haiau* motored across the bay, red-sailed junks drifted on the glassy sea among the dark, scrub-covered isles—a scene from a Chinese silk painting.

At Hang Luon I hired a *thuyen nan*, a bamboo rowboat, to ferry me closer than our larger craft could go. We rowed into the mouth of a cave,

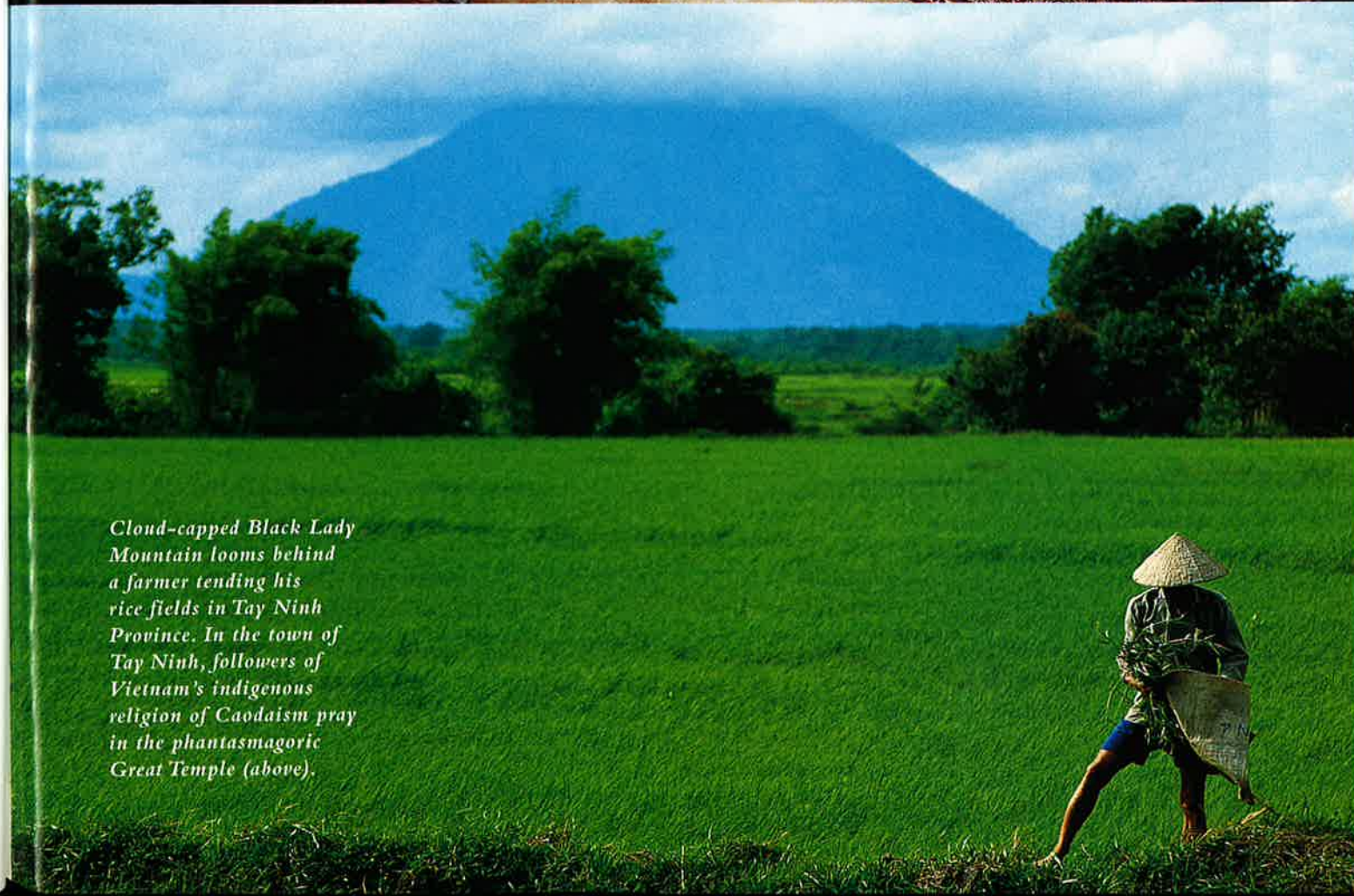
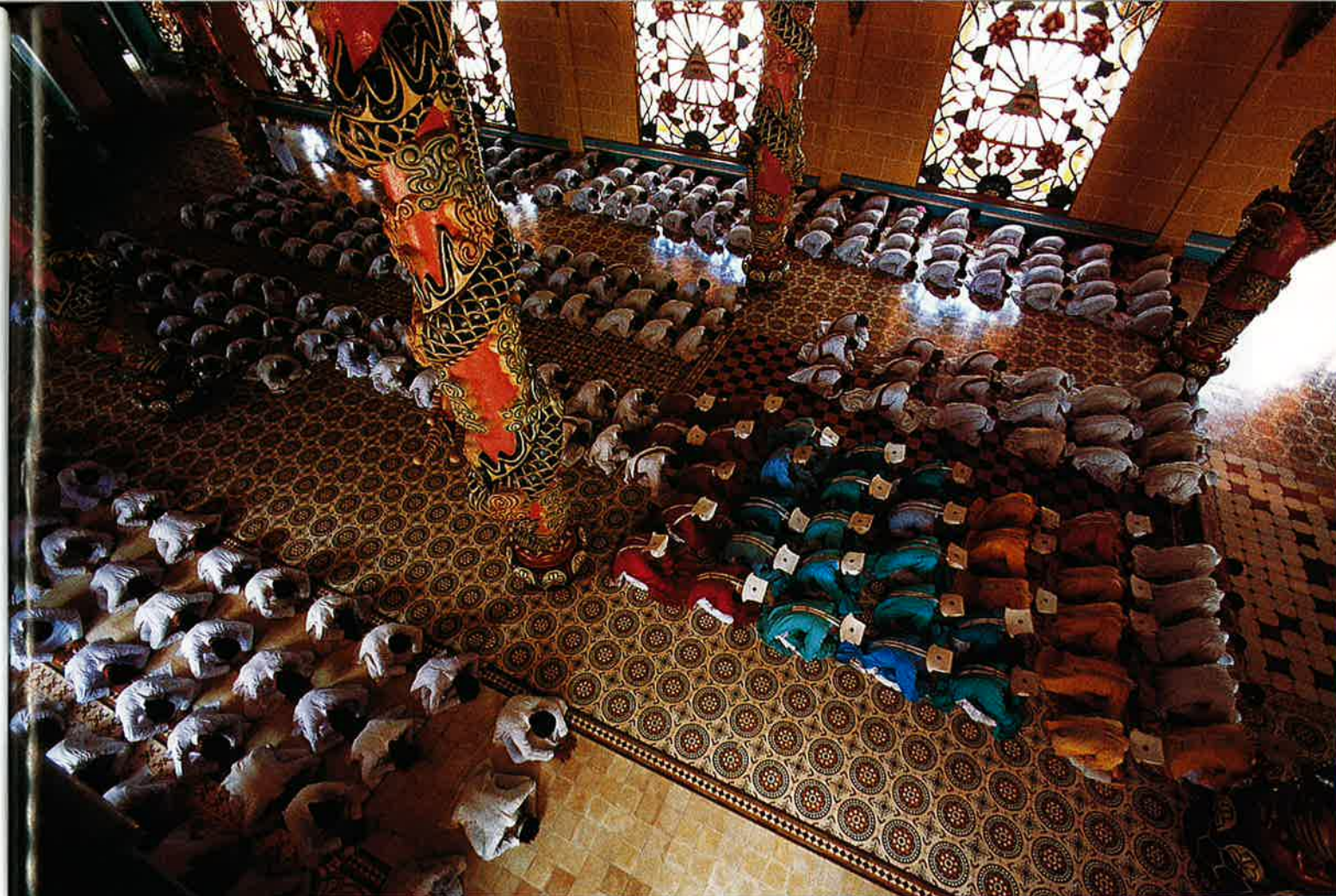
its low ceiling hung with stalactites, and emerged in an interior lake of lime green water open to the sky. We were alone in our little boat, enclosed by a circle of high rock walls. The only sounds were the splash of the boatman's oars and the chatter of birds hidden in the patchy vegetation. It was as if we'd discovered some drowned volcano where Captain Nemo and the *Nautilus* could have surfaced at any moment.

An overnight train ride from Hanoi took me to the old imperial capital of Hue, nearly halfway down the coast. Beginning in 1802, the 13 emperors of the Nguyen dynasty ruled from Hue, amid the green hills along the north bank of the broad, clear Perfume River, which bisects today's city. The last emperor, Bao Dai, abdicated in 1945 after Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, precipitating the conflict that resulted in the ouster of the French from Vietnam and eventual American involvement.

Hue has long been a center of culture, education, and religion. I found this prosperous, tourist-oriented city of a million one of the most felicitous places I've ever visited. Its setting is stunning, its atmosphere relaxing, its history engrossing.

Hue ranked high according to a gauge that I applied to each city I visited—an unhurried after-dinner tour by pedicab. There are few things more soothing than swaying down dimly lit streets in one of these pedal-powered anachronisms, a soft wind in your face, listening to the whir of the tires and the *jing-jinging* of the driver's bell. In Hue the streets were cleaner than elsewhere, and the people friendlier. Clusters of late-night diners huddled around sidewalk food stands. Giggly children playing badminton along the curb called out to me. Bicyclists leisurely rode side by side, chatting and joking, often holding hands. In a park that we passed, lovers clung to one another in the darkness, as motionless and silent as statuary.

The circuit of Hue's official sights usually begins at the Citadel, the moated and walled fortress-city that



Cloud-capped Black Lady Mountain looms behind a farmer tending his rice fields in Tay Ninh Province. In the town of Tay Ninh, followers of Vietnam's indigenous religion of Cao Daiism pray in the phantasmagoric Great Temple (above).



Sunday flower market clogs Nguyen Hue Boulevard in downtown Saigon, where capitalism is once again king.

originally encompassed the entire capital of the Nguyen dynasty. It was begun in 1804 by the first Nguyen emperor, Gia Long. Today the Citadel—another world heritage site—is touched with melancholy: It was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting

of the Vietnam War, which left much of the 1,300-acre complex in ruin. Restorations are proceeding slowly—the ornate Oriental flourishes of the Noon Gate, Throne Room, and Imperial Library indicate the former splendor—but a visit here still involves piecing together images from remnant walls.

In better repair are the tombs of the emperors, in the countryside

south of Hue. I visited three, the most striking of which was the tomb of Minh Mang, who died in 1840. After walking through an honor courtyard embellished with statues of mandarins, past an elaborate temple and a progression of august pavilions, I stood looking across a crescent-shaped lake at the understated resting place Minh Mang designed for himself—a simple earthen dome

covered with pine trees and shrubs.

Near the end of my stay I took an evening cruise on the Perfume River aboard a dragon boat, a roofed, open-sided sampan. Four musicians in bright silk *ao dai* performed songs of Hue. Their voices and music rippled out across the river, which was streaked with the lights of the city. At one point the musicians gave the passengers lighted candles mounted in

lanterns of colored paper. We leaned over the side and placed the floating lanterns on the water, a tradition begun by the emperors. As the musicians resumed their playing, the lanterns trailed away in our wake, a line of glowing pastel beacons bobbing gently on the black water.

IT SEEMS THAT THROUGHOUT THEIR 2,000-year history, whenever the Vietnam-

ese weren't under the thumb of a foreign power, they were trying to dominate someone themselves. After the Vietnamese at last managed to throw out the Chinese, they spread slowly south from the Red River Delta. In the 15th century they overran the Kingdom of Champa, which had ruled present-day central Vietnam since the second century. In the 17th and early 18th centuries they would

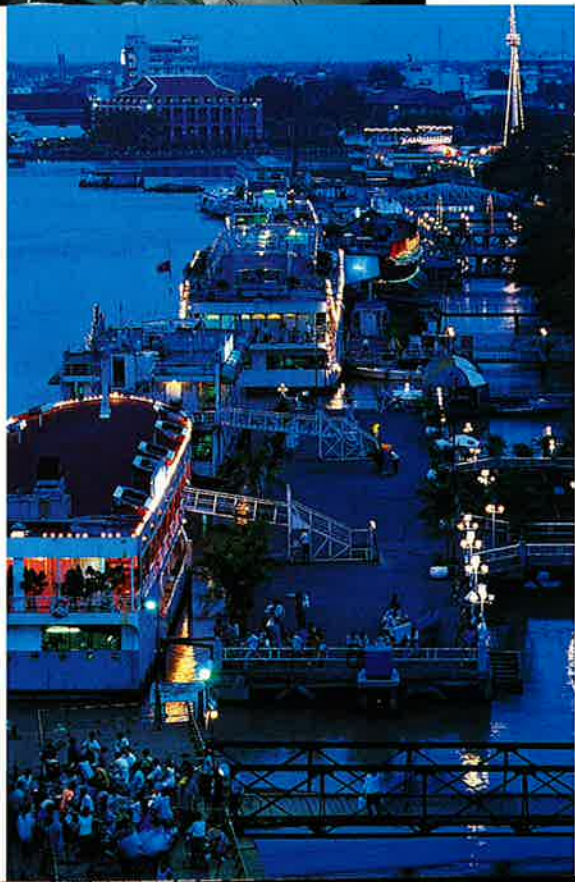
wrest the Mekong Delta from Cambodia.

You can still see some of the tall brick towers that were built as religious shrines by the seafaring, piratical Chams. They jut up here and there all over central and southern Vietnam, ghostly, vine-encrusted reminders of a lost kingdom. The best place to see Cham artifacts, however, is in Danang, a busy port of over two million, three hours by car south of Hue. The city's renowned Cham Museum houses some 300 skillfully wrought stone or terra-cotta sculptures—Vietnam's best collection of Cham artwork.

You won't spend long in this open-air gallery of yellow stucco, which sits in a small park on the banks of the Han River, before you recognize the prevailing image of worship among the Indian-influenced Chams—the female breast. Among the statues of Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu are sections of friezes with rows of uniform breasts. I found myself smitten by a dancing girl wearing a scanty costume and a demure smile—a tenth-century sandstone rendering of Apsaras, captured in midstep, her arms and legs curving gracefully.

Seven miles south of Danang is a reminder of a different era—China Beach, where GIs on R & R briefly escaped the war. The morning I visited, I shared the miles-long crescent of sand with about ten others—a scattering of sunbathers, three children

Saigon a-go-go (top to bottom): Night swirls around the Continental Hotel; downtown hot spot, the Lemon Grass Restaurant serves artful portions of Vietnam's world-class cuisine; at the former Independence Palace, youngsters take a turn behind the controls of the helicopter that carried South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu to safety near war's end; the Saigon River waterfront glitters with the lights of floating restaurants.



persistently hawking shells, and a pair of newlyweds still in their finery, mooning and mugging for a video cameraman. If you want to experience *that* China Beach, better hurry. A U.S. firm plans to build a 243-million-dollar resort, with five hotels, a golf course, and a conference center.

Directly behind China Beach loom the Marble Mountains, five large hills honeycombed with caves that were used as hiding places by the Vietcong. I climbed the steep stone stairway leading up the largest of the five hills, Thuy Son. Along the first part of the stairway, knots of war casualties sat on their haunches, hands outstretched. Passing those clusters of maimed

souls was like negotiating a living version of the Stations of the Cross.

Over the centuries, sanctuaries have been built in several of the caves here. In Huyen Khong Cave, a cavern with a cluster of openings in the roof, shafts of light slanted down through clouds of joss smoke, illuminating a sculpture of Buddha carved high on one wall. It was eerie to learn that during the war the VC had used this dank chamber as a field hospital.

I stepped out into the sunshine and followed the pathway to the Linh Ong Pagoda. Built into the side of the mountain, the recently restored sanctuary has a small, shady orchid garden, a restful spot from which to look out over the sea. The nearby Vong Hai Da overlook affords an unobstructed view of China Beach. Gazing at the slumberous beach lapped by gentle surf, I wondered what the VC must have thought as they watched all those American soldiers lolling on the sand.

Anyone intrigued by

Danang and its Cham artifacts should consider a stop in Nha Trang, 335 miles on down the coast. This burgeoning resort's Po Nagar Cham towers, among the country's finest, were built between the 7th and 12th centuries. I wandered among the four orange-brick towers that remain out of the original eight. Their interiors were blackened from centuries of joss smoke. Outside, visitors were having their pictures taken with two shy Cham girls wrapped in yards of bright cloth. (I was surprised to learn that there are still some 60,000 Cham people in Vietnam.)

For me, Nha Trang provoked mixed emotions. This was one of the places I covered as a Navy journalist during the war. I couldn't avoid the thought that if an unknown Vietcong artilleryman had aimed his rocket launcher two degrees to the left one sweaty March night in 1971, someone else's byline would be on this article. Nha Trang also made me realize how many things I failed to see when I was in Vietnam before: The city took me aback with its beauty—its arc of white sand, framed between muscular green mountains and a shallow sea of startling hue and clarity; its esplanade lined with outdoor cafés and shade-giving palms and planters of flowers; its picturesque fleet of wooden trawlers, all painted the same deep blue.

The downside to Nha Trang was the relentless hustle. I could hardly set foot on the crowded beach without being pestered by peddlers and hucksters. (Groups seemed less susceptible: Predators always go after stragglers from the herd.) I recall thinking that Nha Trang's beach scene was merely preparing me for the even bigger hustle of my final stop.

Saigon. Just thinking of that name unleashed a rush of memories. During the war the capital of the South had been a sandbagged-and-concertina-wired jumble, the haunt of thieves and whores and crooked politicians. I spent the better part of a year in those tainted precincts, and contemplating my return had me steeling myself for an

unpleasant ending to my current trip.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered the new Saigon—buffed to a high gloss, streets clean, fountains fountaining, parks and gardens well tended. The whole place looked to have been given a fresh coat of paint. Maybe there was something to the old Pearl of the Orient tag after all.

Downtown on Dong Khoi, the randy wartime honky-tonks have given way to respectable shops and restaurants. The contrast is stark between Saigon and its low-key counterpart in the north. Whereas Hanoi seems to be fighting to preserve the past, Saigon is roaring toward the future. This city of over six million is Vietnam's commercial engine, with 35 percent of the country's manufacturing and retail trade.

As always, Lam Son Square, in the heart of downtown, is the place to get your bearings. Stand on the steps of the whitewashed Municipal Theatre and you can see for blocks down wide, shop-lined Le Loi Boulevard. Most of Saigon's tourist sights are within walking distance or a short pedicab ride from the square. Strike off east from the square down Dong Khoi and you'll soon come to the waterfront, with its line of floating restaurants. Strolling past them, I listened to dueling bands amp out a medley of '60s and '70s American hits.

In the opposite direction, a few blocks west of Lam Son Square—just past the twin-spired, redbrick Notre Dame Cathedral—stands one of Saigon's most interesting sights, the home of the man who ruled the Republic of South Vietnam until its downfall, Nguyen Van Thieu. Known as Independence Palace under Thieu, this '60s-mod white monolith is now called Reunification Palace. It was here, on the morning of April 30, 1975, that a North Vietnamese tank smashed through the tall iron gates out front and drove onto the palace grounds, signaling the end of the war and the reunification of Vietnam after 21 years as two countries.

The palace has been kept just as it was before Thieu fled into exile, spiriting away his family and, some say, a sizable chunk of American foreign aid. Inside the palace's dozens of

rooms are fine Oriental carpets and ceramics, handmade furnishings and lacquerware. The most evocative area is the underground command center, where Thieu and his generals monitored the war. Wall maps show the positions and strengths of military units around the country. You can almost feel the panic that must have filled this subterranean chamber as word came in that the South's defenses were crumbling. Out on a terrace helipad sits the chopper that whisked Thieu away when the outcome of the war became clear.

For those who are interested, a short stroll to the north of Reunification Palace is the city's War Crimes Exhibition. A collection of U.S. military equipment clutters the courtyard of the former home of the U.S. Information Service, and inside is a display of grisly photos intended to demonstrate American "crimes of aggression." The best advice I could give the Vietnamese is this: Get rid of it; there were atrocities enough on both sides.

The Vietnamese I saw working here were all smiles and cordiality, an odd juxtaposition with the tenor of the exhibit. Stranger still were the craft booths immediately outside the door of the main photo gallery; one instant you can peruse the effects of Agent Orange and white phosphorus, and the next you can browse among lacquerware jewelry boxes and hand-carved statues of Buddha.

In a way, though, that disquieting combination sums up the nature of a visit to this country. Everywhere, reminders of the war coexist with examples of Vietnam's lasting heritage. Even for someone who comes here seeking to experience Vietnam for itself and not to wallow in the past, new sights inevitably trigger old associations. The trick, I discovered—not always an easy one—is to keep those memories from blinding us to the worth and beauty of what we're seeing now. □

TRAVELER's managing editor, Paul Martin wrote about Jamaica in the September/October 1995 issue. Steve Raymer now teaches photojournalism at Indiana University following a 23-year career with the National Geographic Society.

Vietnam TravelWise

Planning your trip

Entering Vietnam For a tourist visit of up to 30 days, foreigners must have a visa (\$25). To obtain a visa from the embassy (see "For more information"), you must have approval from the Vietnamese government, which costs an additional \$40. If you're traveling in a group, your tour operator can handle this for you.

The dong is the basic unit of currency. As of press time, \$1 U.S. is worth about 11,000 dong (one dong is worth less than one cent U.S.). Traveler's checks can be cashed at major banks and newly established foreign exchange bureaus for a fee of about 3 percent. On the street, it's best to pay in dong since prices are usually lower, but dollars still come in handy for some transactions with taxi drivers and local merchants. (Returning Americans should note that dong cannot be exchanged for dollars in the U.S.) Many major hotels accept American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. **NOTE:** All prices below are in U.S. dollars.

To call Vietnam (12 hours ahead of eastern standard time) direct from the U.S., use the international access code 011, the country code 84, and the city code (Danang 51, Hanoi 4, Ho Chi Minh City 8, Hue 54, Nha Trang 58).

When to go Because of its wide range of latitudes and altitudes, Vietnam has an extremely varied climate, so there is no perfect season to visit. When one region is wet or cold, there is always another that is sunny and pleasant. In general, the rainy season occurs countrywide from May to Oct.; expect daily downpours and steamy temperatures ranging from 75° to 90°F. The winter monsoon brings wet, chilly weather to areas north of Nha Trang Oct.-Mar., when temperatures average in the 60s; temperatures in higher altitudes can drop to 32°. Weather in central Vietnam depends on altitude and distance from the coast, with higher elevations inland following northern weather patterns. Feb.-Apr. are the hottest months in the tropical south, with humid highs of 80° to 90°.

Things you should know Travelers arriving directly from the U.S. are not required to have any immunizations. Mosquito-borne diseases are prevalent, however, so you may want to take antimalarial medicine and update vaccinations, including hepatitis A, typhoid fever, and Japanese encephalitis. Medical care and supplies don't meet U.S. standards, so bring adequate prescription medicine. To prevent diarrhea, avoid tap water (bottled and canned beverages are safest), ice, uncooked garnishes, unpeeled fruits, and raw seafood and vegetables.

In rural areas show caution when venturing off roadways on foot, particularly in the former Demilitarized Zone, where unexploded land mines and other ordnance are still being recovered. In urban areas, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, be alert to pickpockets (often children) and purse-snatchers (usually young men operating from motorbikes).

How to get there

By plane To Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport and Ho Chi Minh City's Tan Son Nhat International Airport. No U.S. airlines serve Viet-

nam directly so your flight is likely to include a transfer in Bangkok, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Flight time can be 18 hours from the west coast of the U.S., not including layovers, and economy fares begin around \$1,100 round-trip. Numerous Asian carriers serve Vietnam, the least expensive being Vietnam Airlines. For names of travel agents that sell tickets on Vietnam Airlines, call the airline's Montreal office at 514-395-4646 or 800-565-ASIA. A taxi ride from Hanoi's airport to downtown costs around \$30; a cab from Ho Chi Minh City's airport downtown runs \$20-25. Better yet, ask your hotel to send a car and driver for about the same price.

Getting around

By bicycle or cyclo You can usually rent a bicycle (a good way to get around congested cities) for about \$2 per day. A cyclo (three-wheel pedicab with a driver) costs about \$1 per hour. Taxis are available in most cities. **By boat** You can hire a boat for short excursions on Ha-long Bay and in the Mekong Delta. **By car** All rental cars include a driver and gas. Within a city, rentals average \$25 a day; outside town, rates are calculated at \$.25-.45 per kilometer, with an additional charge of 1½ times the accumulated rate for a one-way rental. Roads are often one lane and are shared with numerous pedestrians, bicycles, pedicabs, motorbikes, and farm animals. National Highway 1 follows the coast for 1,056 miles between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. From Hue south, the road is mostly paved, but the northern stretch is in poor condition. **By plane** Vietnam Airlines handles all domestic flights and serves all destinations discussed in this story. However, the airport in Hue will be closed until fall of 1996 for renovation; fly into Danang, which is about three hours from Hue by car. **By train** The Renovation Express Train is the cheapest way to travel great distances, but it can be slow and uncomfortable. Trains run between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City twice daily except Sun., with stops at major coastal cities; the journey takes roughly 48 hours. Fares (\$48-117) depend on the type of berth and seat (hard or soft).

Selecting a tour

First-time tourists to Vietnam should plan a trip through an experienced tour operator. That way, you'll be able to see a lot in a limited amount of time, and you won't be delayed by the technicalities of traveling in a developing country. The companies listed below generally offer a range of tours, from those highlighting important sites throughout the country to ones focusing on rural culture or the Vietnam War. In addition, most are happy to customize your trip. The following rates are per person, double occupancy, and include round-trip airfare from Los Angeles, unless otherwise noted.

• **Absolute Asia** 180 Varick St., 16th Floor, New York, NY 10014; 212-627-1950 or 800-736-8187. Make-your-own trip, from a five-day sampler (\$1,485, including airfare from Bangkok) to 16 days with northern hill tribes (\$4,990).

• **Bolder Adventures** P.O. Box 1279, Boulder, CO 80306; 303-443-6789 or 800-

642-2742. Private itinerary planning from \$125-175 per day, as well as a 17-day small group tour from \$2,995 (land only) and five days with northern hill tribes (\$750, land only).

• **Geographic Expeditions** 2627 Lombard St., San Francisco, CA 94123; 415-922-0448 or 800-777-8183. Weekly private and group departures for eight- and eleven-day tours (from \$1,890 or \$2,395, land only), plus combined tour to Cambodia (19 days from \$3,990, land only) and trekking in northern Vietnam (14 days from \$2,190, land only).

• **Global Spectrum** 1901 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006; 202-293-2065 or 800-419-4446. The only tour operator on our list focusing exclusively on Vietnam. Specializes in custom itineraries for groups and individuals. Also wide range of tours, including Tet celebration, northern hiking, and humanitarian service. Country tours from 15 days (\$3,995) to 25 days (\$4,995); nine-day veterans tour from \$2,995.

• **VivaUSA Tours** 1840 W. 17th St., Santa Ana, CA 92706; 714-972-2248 or 800-360-8482. Recommended by *Fielding's Vietnam*. Unique theme tours, such as seeing Vietnam by motorcycle (20 days from \$4,999), with art in mind (15 days from \$3,999), and on a budget (\$1,999 for nine days).

Places to eat and stay

Recommended by Wink Dulles, author of *Fielding's Vietnam* (see "Recommended reading").

Restaurants

Restaurant prices indicate the average cost of a three-course dinner for one, including a non-alcoholic beverage, tax, and tip.

Vietnamese food is a synthesis of ten centuries of Chinese rule and almost a century of French colonization, with Thai, Lao, Cambodian, Indian, and Portuguese influences. The Chinese-style dishes of the north are milder than the curries and chiles of the south, with their Indian and Thai origins.

Western food can be found in the cities these days, and even remote hotels serve American-style breakfasts.

Danang TU DO RESTAURANT 172 Tran Phu; 84-51-821-869. Good Chinese, European, and Vietnamese food served in a large courtyard—perfect for swilling a cold beer on a balmy evening. Recommended: steamed prawns, succulent

Boatman hauls vegetables to market in the Mekong Delta.



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*See your participating dealer for details.





Wooden figures cavort at a Hanoi water puppet theater.

lobster, spring rolls with *nuoc mam* (fish sauce). No credit cards. \$5-10.

Hanoi

A LITTLE ITALIAN 81 Thu Nhum St.; 84-4-825-8167. You'll find ten kinds of pizza at this cozy American-style pizzeria, with entertainment by an ensemble of musicians from the Hanoi Symphony on Sunday evenings. The Fisho pizza comes with prawns, tuna, and a splash of lemon juice. My favorite: the Margarita, a thick, doughy crust smothered with cheddar cheeses and a pinch of fresh basil. No credit cards. \$4-8.

CAFÉ TWO FIVETWO 252 Hang Bong St.; 84-4-825-0216. For a quick, mouthwatering French breakfast, this unassuming street café has no equal. Recommended: homemade pastries, raisin muffins, croissants, and crême caramel. Steamed pork buns, omelettes, sandwiches, and hamburgers round out the menu, but the real dazzlers are the cream puffs, éclairs, *pain au chocolat*, and brioche. No credit cards. \$2-4, pastries \$.50-\$1.

INDOCHINE 16 Nam Ngu St.; 84-4-824-6097. Expensive, fashionable, and trendy, Indochine is popular with expat hipsters, yuppies, and an increasing number of their Vietnamese counterparts. Specializes in traditional Vietnamese dishes—sweet and sour fish soup; *bo bay mon*, seven courses of beef, each prepared differently. AE, V. \$8-10.

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

LA CAMARGUE 16 Cao Ba Quat, District 1; 84-8-824-3148. French/Mediterranean restaurant on two levels with open-air terrace, three bars. Specialties: four kinds of homemade pasta, pita pizza, smoked salmon and baked potato, fried frog legs, kangaroo steak. MC, V. \$20-25.

GIVRAL PÂTISSERIE & CAFÉ 169 Dong Khoi St., District 1; 84-8-824-2750 (restaurant), 829-2747 (pastry shop). Great location on Lam Son Square. Good place for a snack while people-watching; choose from homemade ice cream and yogurt; limited selection of Western food. House specialty: ice cream served in a frozen baby coconut. No credit cards. \$5-7.

VIETNAM HOUSE 93-95 Dong Khoi St., District 1; 84-8-829-1623. Attentive service and an elegant setting make this restaurant popular. Live traditional musical performances accompany such magnificent Vietnamese dishes as *chao tom* (seasoned shrimp paste grilled on thin sugarcane skewers with a hint of garlic).

Piano bar downstairs. MC, V. \$5-10.

Hue

LAC THIEN RESTAURANT 6 Dinh Tien Hoang St.; 84-54-827-348. This family restaurant specializes in *banh khoa* or Happy Crepes. Stir-fried shrimp, ham, bean sprouts, and onions are added to a rice-flour crepe batter in a sizzling pan, creating a crunchy crust on the underside and a moist, chewy top. They're served with spicy *nuoc tuong* sauce. No credit cards. \$.50-\$1.

SONG HUONG FLOATING RESTAURANT

North of the Trang Tien Bridge, near the intersection of Le Loi and Hung Vuong; 84-54-823-738. Seafood is the

primary fare here on the bank of the Perfume River. Dishes include steamed lobster and stir-fried squid. Try the local beer, Huda. No credit cards. \$8.

Nha Trang

LYS RESTAURANT 117 Hoang Van Thu St.; 84-58-820-086. Centrally located, this is one of the many restaurants in Nha Trang that specializes in seafood—just-caught shrimp, squid, lobster, and a variety of fish. A bright and bustling establishment; you'll find a menu in English here. \$5-10.

Lodgings

Lodging prices indicate the range of rates for a double room, except where indicated.

Danang

BACH DANG HOTEL 50 Bach Dang St.; 84-51-823-649 or 823-034, fax 84-51-821-659. Located across Bach Dang Street from the Han River, this may be the nicest place to stay in Danang, with 91 comfortable rooms. Decent restaurant (Vietnamese, Chinese, and continental cuisine), nightclub. AE, MC, V. \$45-120.

Hanoi

HOTEL SOFITEL METROPOLE 15 Ngo Quyen St.; 84-4-826-6919 or (in the U.S.) 800-221-4542, fax 84-4-826-6920. Completely renovated, the grande dame of Hanoi's hotels is the city's only five-star experience. The 109 rooms and 16 suites feature original hardwood floors and shuttered French windows. The upscale crowd gather at the Bar Le Club. The restaurant Le Beaulieu serves delightful but expensive French and Asian cuisine; live music and the most extensive wine selection in Vietnam. Airport shuttle. Book at least a month in advance. AE, DC, MC, V. \$219-449.

THANG LOI HOTEL Yen Phu St., West Lake; 84-4-826-8211, fax 84-4-825-2800. New lakeside bamboo bungalows on beautifully landscaped grounds bring the number of rooms to 175. Just outside the city center. Swimming pool, tennis court, sauna, massage. AE, MC, V. \$115-162, including breakfast.

TRANGAN HOTEL 58 Hang Gai St.; 84-4-826-8982 or 826-1135, fax 84-4-825-8511. Comfortable, cozy (11 rooms), and completely renovated, this five-story hotel has the feel of a northern California guest house, with large, cool, slightly Victorian rooms. Old Quarter location near Hoan Kiem Lake. No elevator, but rooms at the top are worth the climb for the stunning views. Romantic rooftop restaurant.

Car rentals, travel agency, tour guides. AE, MC, V. \$70-100, including breakfast.

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

BONG SEN HOTEL 117-119-121-123 Dong Khoi St., District 1; 84-8-829-1516, fax 84-8-829-8076. This is actually two adjacent hotels in the heart of central Saigon's shopping district; Bong Sen I is pricier than Bong Sen II. 136 rooms. Two restaurants (French, Vietnamese), café, deli, bar, valet, doctor on call, tour desk. AE, DC, MC, V. \$45-210, including breakfast.

CONTINENTAL HOTEL 132-134 Dong Khoi St., District 1; 84-8-829-9201 or 829-9255, fax 84-8-829-0936. Built in 1880, this French colonial building—featured in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*—was renovated in 1989. Its 87 enormous rooms have authentic, if diminutive, French windows and high ceilings. Large interior garden. Three elegant bars, superb but expensive Italian restaurant (Chez Guido), excellent Vietnamese restaurant. Swimming pool, sauna, car rental. AE, MC, V. \$115-178, including breakfast.

NEWWORLD HOTEL 76 Le Dai, District 1; 84-8-822-8888, fax 84-8-823-0710. Saigon's largest hotel (544 rooms) dominates the downtown skyline. The New World would be worthy of five stars if it weren't for the sometimes shoddy finish of its rooms. Great dining. All the amenities. MC, V. \$185-860.

Hue

CENTURY RIVERSIDE 49 Le Loi St.; 84-54-823-390, fax 84-54-823-399. Modern hotel with 147 large rooms and suites; lovely setting on the bank of the Perfume River. Lush, tropical gardens; river cruises from private pier. Restaurant, bar, tennis courts, swimming pool. AE, MC, V. \$70-165.

HUONG GIANG HOTEL 51 Le Loi St.; 84-54-822-182 or 822-122, fax 84-54-823-102. Half of the 150 rooms offer superb views of the Perfume River. Two great restaurants, café, large gardens, airy reception rooms, car and bike rentals. Lower priced rooms are a bargain. AE, MC, V. \$50-200.

Nha Trang

BAO DAI'S VILLAS Vinh Nguyen quarter, end of Tran Phu St.; 84-58-881-048, fax 84-58-881-471. Located about two miles southeast of town, Nha Trang's classiest accommodations were part of the estate of former Emperor Bao Dai. Recently renovated, the villas offer stunning views of the South China Sea, the harbor, and several islands. The 48 rooms are large and breezy, a real bargain. No credit cards. \$25-70.

Recommended reading

• *Fielding's Vietnam*, by Wink Dulles. Redondo Beach, CA: Fielding Worldwide, 1995. Lots of insider information, with plenty to satisfy the adventuresome traveler.

• *The Vietnam Guidebook*, by Barbara M. Cohen. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994. Packed with historical information and great for its detailed maps of most areas.

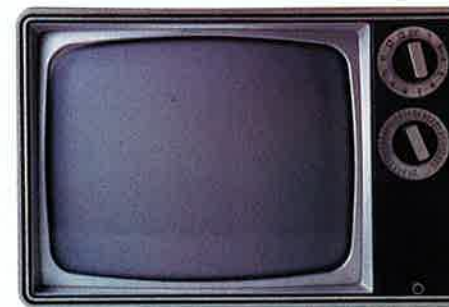
• *Vietnam: A Travel Survival Kit*, by Daniel Robinson and Robert Storey. Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet Publications, 1995. The most comprehensive, authoritative guide to Vietnam. Strong on travel logistics, this compact volume covers even remote villages. Color photographs.

For more information

Contact the Embassy of Vietnam, 1233 20th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-861-0737.

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Entries must be postmarked no later than June 15, 1996.



All winners will be selected by random drawing from a pool of all correct entries properly submitted by June 15, 1996. Odds of winning depend on the number of correct entries submitted by June 15, 1996. The Grand Prize: passage for two on one of National Geographic's regularly scheduled educational travel tours in Europe, including airfare, hotels, admission fees and tour guide services, and most meals. Winner pays for all other expenses and taxes. Trip must be taken by June 30, 1997, and is subject to availability. Void where prohibited by law. Call 1-800-990-8211 for complete contest rules.