

## **Hanoi, City of the Future**

Hanoi Vietnam is a perfect example of a new kind of Third World city. The country is growing rapidly, and the Vietnamese government now issues [Vietnam visa on arrival](#) for tourists easily and wants to establish manufacturing and export facilities just about everywhere it can. So, it's taking over the rice fields in the outskirts of Hanoi, giving people a one-time housing stipend (which, being country-folk, they usually blow, but that's another story), and paving the rice fields—the better to build new factories, houses, the power grid they need, and the roads to get to them.

But there's only so much "outskirts" near the city, and so the government is taking land that's many miles and many, many hours outside Hanoi and building new towns from the ground up: brand-new luxury apartments, chi-chi stores, and the smaller commercial merchants needed to support them. We might call this the "suburbs," but the development process here is very different, dramatically telescoped in time. What took 100 years to shape say, the New York or Boston metropolis is taking less than a single generation here.

It's a self-perpetuating process: the countryside is cleared or paved, people are thrown off their land, they move to the big cities which lack the infrastructure to handle their basic needs, and more established people move outside the city. This creates pressure for more paving of agricultural or forested land, and the cycle continues. That sweat suit or scarf that's "Made in Vietnam" is way, way more complicated than it looks.

## **Looking Back on Hanoi**

After almost a week in Hanoi, we are staying at [hotels in Hanoi's Old Quarter](#), I'm leaving—with very mixed feelings. It's hard to describe the chaotic intensity of the traffic there—and I've been to both Delhi and Istanbul. So, forget about getting anywhere in under a half-hour. And because the sidewalks themselves are so crowded (with street vendors and parked motorbikes, among other things), it's impossible to walk anywhere without paying a great deal of attention. In short, there's no relaxing outdoors anywhere in the city except for the handful of rather small parks.

But the positives—let's start with the food. An incredible variety of seafood is cheap and deliciously prepared: a dozen types of prawns, clams ranging from petite to grotesquely large, prehistoric-looking creatures resembling fish, squid, and lobsters.

Noodles—pho—are available morning, noon, and night. And although winter temperatures here plunge into the 50s, the tropical fruits are everywhere—mango, papaya, dragon fruit, pomelo, jackfruit, and several things they vaguely call "melon."

And although the streets are a nightmare if you're trying to get somewhere, they are a treat if you're not in a hurry. Craftspersons, food vendors, repair-people (shoes, motorbikes, teeth), and souvenir sellers are shoulder-to-shoulder. Bewilderingly, just one block over are calm and elegant Fifth Avenue boutiques—Hermes, Vuitton, Ferragamo, Cartier.

And did I mention the traffic? You haven't lived until you've been in a bicycle rickshaw heading against traffic during rush hour. This is one town in which it's reassuring to have an old taxi driver. It means he's survived the mean streets—at least so far.

I bought some silk shirts here, visited the peaceful gardens of the thousand-year-old Temple of Literature (a working Confucian University when Europe was struggling through the Dark Ages), spent a boring 15 minutes in the “Hanoi Hilton” (the French-built hell where John McCain and other American pilots were imprisoned), and had my beard trimmed by a Goth-looking stylist for two bucks. Farewell, Hanoi. Glad I got to know.