



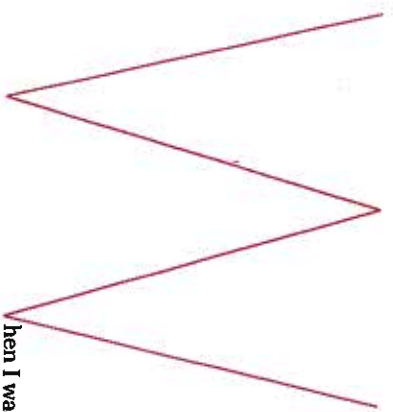
A NEW STAR IN THE EAST



Vietnam's coastline is spectacular. Its cities buzz with capitalist vitality – and a zillion mopeds. The food is mesmerising. How much has changed since the war, marvels veteran reporter **Michael Buerk**, as he travels the length of the country



Red sails in the sunshine
Michael Buerk (inset) took a crewed, luxury junk through Ha Long Bay – “Simply one of the great natural wonders of the world”



When I was a young reporter, Western visitors to Hanoi were greeted with a Sam 2 missile up the afterburner, followed, if they survived, by several years locked into a rusty iron stockade.

Thirty-five years later, arriving as a veteran, I met with a rather different welcome: an air-conditioned limousine and the most beautiful girl in the world, sleek in a skin-tight, pearl-coloured *ao dai*, carrying two bottles of ice-cold Laurent Perrier. Times change.

I didn't make it to the Vietnam war. I had the jabs, but the collapse of the south in 1975 was very sudden. I was still in London, getting measured for my safari suit, when the last refugees were winched from the roof of the American embassy.

So I just missed the first – and last – television war, and never saw Graham Greene's Indochina, that heady mix of humidity, corruption and betrayal.

These days, Hanoi bears few of the scars of the most intensive bombing campaign in history, nor many signs of its 40 years as the capital of Ho Chi Minh's ruthless police state. The city centre is a gracious place, or would be if it weren't flooded by a million mopeds. The ochre colonial buildings are straight out of 1920s France. The street life is colourful and quirky: old men playing badminton in the boulevards and roadside food perhaps even the French would balk at, though pig's ear boiled in monosodium glutamate may be better than it looks.

Vietnamese food is actually spectacular, and not just for the unreflectively brave. I got taken in hand by Pham Anh Tuyet, a bustling, imperious lady who is more than Vietnam's most famous TV cook; she's the guardian of the country's cultural heritage, a cross between Gordon Ramsay, Sir Roy Strong and Hyacinth Bucket.

I set off with her into Hanoi's old quarter, the thousand-year-old district known as the "36 Streets". Each street once belonged to a separate merchant guild and is still pretty specialised – a street of shoes, of herbal medicines, of fake Ray-Bans.

She ignored them all and led me to the market, half an acre of colour and noise and casual execution. Mrs Pham swept through it like a queen, snapping her fingers at the vegetable sellers, starting down her nose at the pork butchers and eel mongers. She pointed out the more exotic produce – such as writhing bags full of giant toads. ("Boil them alive, then fry them and serve in their own broth with green banana. Like nothing on earth.")

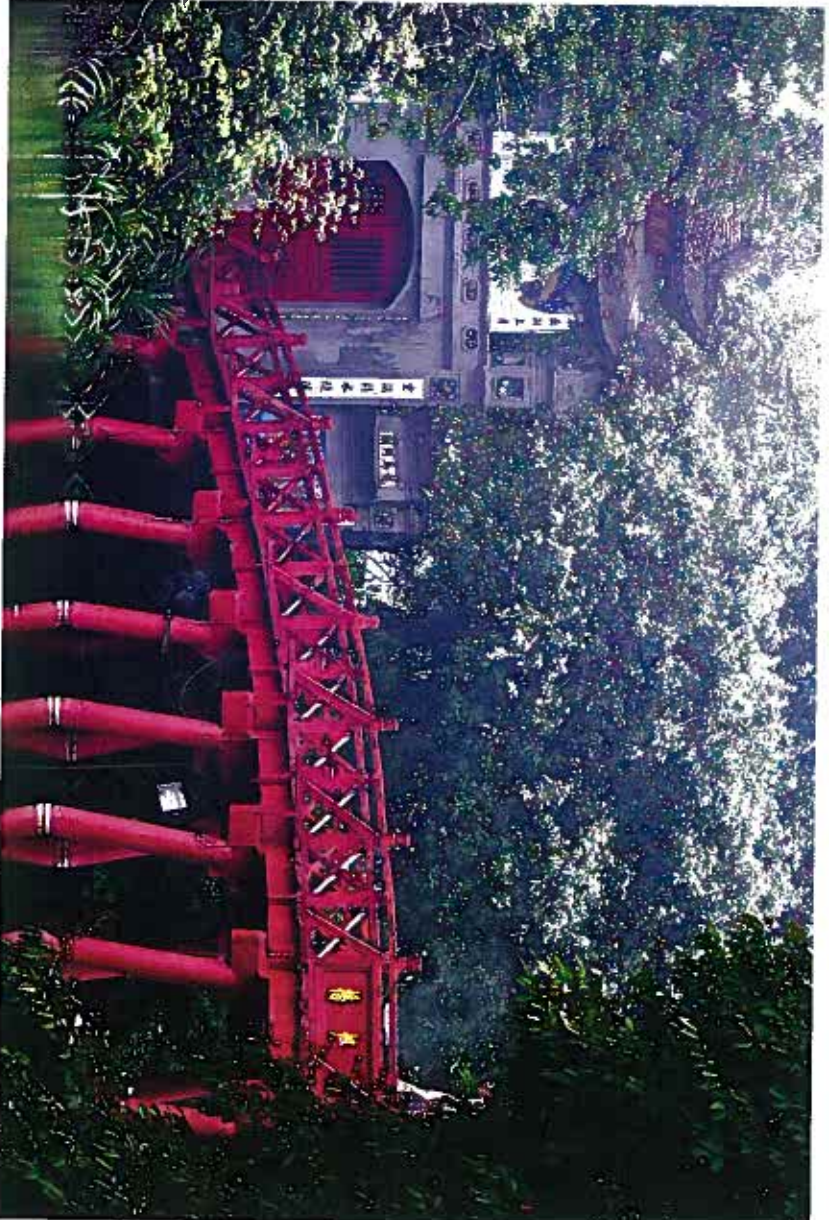
Back at her restaurant in Ma May Street, where she showed off all her awards (including one for being "the best ear, nose and tongue cook in Vietnam"), she set us to work. Together, we made spring rolls of catfish, ginger and turmeric, honeyed chicken with lemongrass and pepper dip, and a salad from banana flowers, papaya and coriander, eating it all with fermented fish sauce. If only I had met Mrs Pham before my brief, humiliating appearance on *Celebrity Masterchef*, that blonde from Atomic Kitten would have had no chance.

I caught up with the ghost of Graham Greene at the Metropole hotel, the old reporters' hangout and now, once again, one of the finest hotels in the East.



THE STREET LIFE IS COLOURFUL AND QUIRKY. OLD MEN PLAY BADMINTON IN THE BOULEVARDS

A seductive cultural mix The cafe at Hanoi's Metropole hotel, once a favourite of Graham Greene; summer rolls with fresh mint, and a bridge over Huan Kiem lake, in the 1,000-year-old centre of Hanoi



CHRIS CALDICOTT, GETTY



Past and present
Street life in modern Hanoi (above), and a reminder of the colonial past in the Victoria Express, which links Hanoi to the hill station of Sapa, home to Tay Hill tribeswomen (below)



I love luxury places that have served as war correspondents' hostels. Greene stayed at the Metropole in the 1950s, working for *Paris Match* and perching a rather poisonous cocktail of gin, vermouth and cassis. The 100-year-old French hotel, with its white colonial facade and green shutters outside, dark wood panelling inside, has been restored, and is now supplemented by a tall Opera wing behind, so you have a choice between traditional and modern. The service, even by Far Eastern standards, is sublime. The champagne girl at the airport was just the start. Book a suite and you get your own butler, 24 hours a day.

The fortunes of the Metropole reflect those of Vietnam itself. When the French were sent packing it was taken over by Ho's henchmen and became pinched and dowdy. It was used to put up Comintern bigwigs and later, during what Vietnamese call the "American War", high-profile pacifists from the West. Joan Baez strummed her guitar in a bomb shelter under the courtyard as her countrymen's B-52s blew up the bridges over the Red River, a little over a mile away.

The country's lowest point came after the war, when the victorious north imposed an extreme and uncompromising form of communism on the whole country. Vietnam had been the second largest rice exporter in the world, but soon half the country was starving. Australian diplomats hunted rats down the Metropole's corridors.

The regime came to its senses only when the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991. Private enterprise and market economics were allowed back and the country took off.

These days, the country's communist rulers content themselves with clinging to power, creaming off everything they can, and bearing grudges. To this day, the grandchildren of Vietnamese who worked for the Americans can't get public-sector jobs. And it is not wise to stand in the street wondering too loudly why President Nguyen Minh Triet has such bad breath.

Goodness knows what Uncle Ho makes of it all. He died in 1969 but he's not obviously spinning in the glass sarcophagus under his mausoleum. He doesn't even look out of sorts, but then his corpse does spend three months of the year being serviced in Moscow. When it is on duty in Hanoi it competes as the most popular tourist attraction with the extraordinary Vietnamese water puppets – a violent kind of oriental Punch and Judy show staged in a murky pool. Graham Greene would have made a lot of that.

There are two other unmissable destinations in the north. One is the old colonial hill station of Sapa, high up in what the French called the Tonkin Alps, close to the Chinese border. It's an overnight train journey from Hanoi, ideally on the Victoria Express. The "express" is actually a couple of comfortably kitted-out sleeping carriages tagged on to the end of the regular train, which leaves Hanoi station most nights of the week at 9.45pm, arriving just down the mountain from Sapa early the following morning.

The same organisation behind the train owns the best hotel in Sapa, also called the Victoria. It's a Swiss chalet-style place, all wooden pitched roofs and geraniums, that sits on a small hill overlooking the little town and the startlingly green valleys that fall away from it. It makes a good base for exploring the hill country, or just sitting out on your balcony watching the clouds sweep up the valleys and swirl around Mount Fansipan behind you.

Sapa's main attraction, apart from the vivid green rice paddy and mountain scenery, and the relief from the summer humidity of the plains, is the picturesque hill tribes that live up there. Thanks to the wars, Sapa was pretty well derelict up until the 1990s. Mass tourism hasn't had time to turn these people into posing, preying caricatures. So the Black H'Mong still wear their tunics and kilts made of boiled hemp, stained – like their arms and legs when it rains – with indigo. You can see them spinning the stuff on foot-powered jennys in their villages.

But it's a society on the cusp. The customs, dress and lifestyle are largely intact, the villages still much as they were, overrun by chickens, little pot-bellied pigs and half-naked children. But, here and there, satellite dishes poke out of the back of the huts. Chinese mopeds dash up and down the trackways and a surf of litter, inches deep, surrounds the village shops from the sweets the kids have bought with money they have begged off tourists. Get there soon.

Ha Long Bay is a Unesco World Heritage site, whatever that means. It is simply one of the great natural wonders of the world – a scattering of more than 3,000 jagged limestone karsts set in the jade green waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Approaching from Hanoi, it looks as if the sea has been seeded with dragons' teeth and it makes the Thai equivalent, where they filmed that James Bond movie, look like a garden pond.

We sailed through the bay on a luxury junk and the camera's flash-card was full within the hour. The junk looked the part, even though the golden lateen sails were made of what looked like curtain material. It was certainly luxurious. Our cabin had a huge double bed and a proper bathroom and the seafood barbecue could probably have lasted us for a week.

The bay is heart-stoppingly beautiful, especially at dawn and dusk, when the shadows on the forested limestone towers and the silver sheen of high summer humidity turn it into dreamland. A busy dreamland for a day trip, though, with 600 boats mainly plodding the same routes to the same anchorages. The longer, overnight cruise is better – and don't miss Hang Sung Sot cave, bigger than Durham cathedral, with a huge and extraordinarily lifelike penis-shaped stalagmite, helpfully picked out by a pink searchlight. It has been venerated for centuries by the Vietnamese, who evidently have a thing about fertility (there are more than 80 million of them).

Vietnam is shaped like a dumbbell with metal fatigue. It's got more than 2,000 miles of coastline. Da Nang is the place for a beach holiday, as it was for the US Marine "grunts" during the war, who were sent there for R&R. The beach is 20 miles long – the GIs called it China Beach: the victors, with a truly communist sense of style, renamed it "T-20". The town now looks more like Las Vegas, with a strip of bars with names such as "Golden Nugget". The coast road farther south is dotted with the construction sites of new capitalist hotels. Facing them are communist propaganda posters showing square-jawed proletarian heroes staring steadfastly across the road to the beach the proletariat soon won't be able to use.

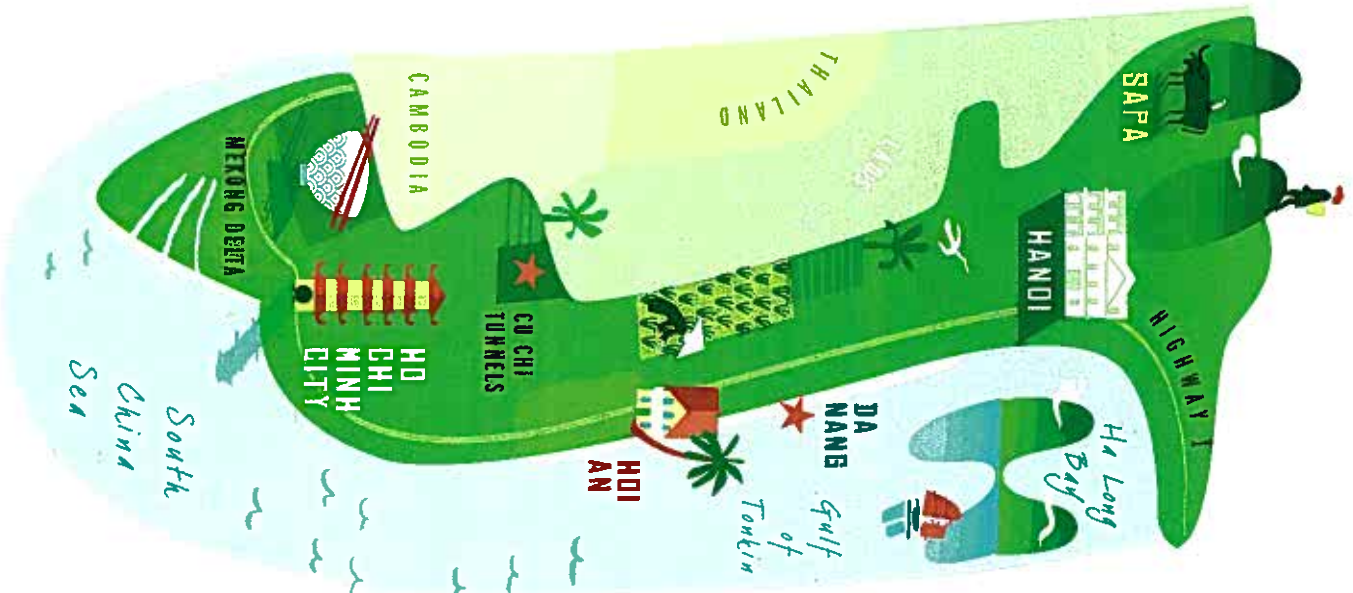
We stayed in the Nam Hai, a \$65-million ultra-luxury hotel on the road to Hoi An that's so stylish it hurts. In my case, literally. The villas are done out like royal pavilions. The canopied bed is on one platform, the bath sunk into another, the divans two steps down. It looks, and is, wonderful – but in the dark, looking for the exquisite bathroom, it's a death-trap.

The food, the swimming pools and the spa – on a shimmering lake, with pavilions and pint-sized Vietnamese girls with fists like steam hammers – are all delightful, at a price. But in these recessionary times, I am not sure how many people actually pay the advertised \$750 a night (for the cheapest villa). A good travel firm will ensure you don't, anyway.

A shuttle-bus ride away, Hoi An is an almost perfectly preserved ancient merchant town. Once across the 16th-century Japanese covered bridge and into the old quarter, with its streets of pagodas and tiny wooden houses (you can touch most of the roofs), you're in a living museum of Vietnamese history.

It's a trainee tourist trap, not yet overrun by visitors, but as it is charming and vibrant and has a lot to see, that's probably just a matter of time. They also seem to be able to knock up silk clothes in an afternoon (my wife bought a tailor-made, reversible silk jacket for about £18).

MAP TANIA WILSON



EVERYONE HAS A MOPED. MY GUIDE SAID HE'D SEEN ONE WITH A BUFFALO ON THE PILLION

We ended up in Ho Chi Minh City, still unofficially known as Saigon, back on the trail of Graham Greene. The old Continental hotel, made famous by Michael Caine in the film version of Greene's *The Quiet American*, is now a style-less barn run by the government. So we stayed next door, at the elegant Park Hyatt, where Greene's foreign correspondent would have hung his solar topee if he'd been around today (and if *The Times* would wear the expense).

Saigon is ablaze with enterprise and engulfed in tidal waves of mopeds. Everybody's got one. The girls ride them in Burberry tartan helmets, swaddled in scarves and opera gloves to stop their skin darkening in the sun. The mopeds carry everything: I saw a family of five on one. When I told my guide, he said that was nothing; he'd seen one with a full-sized buffalo on the pillion.

The war is never far away. The War Remnants Museum is a horrifying must-see. You don't need the propaganda commentary to come to conclusions about what happened to both sides when enormous power took on ideological tenacity and lost (the Americans dropped three times as much high-explosive on Vietnam as was used in the Second World War).

The Cu Chi tunnels are a couple of hours out of town. They're an accessible section of a Viet Cong network that once stretched more than 100 miles from the Cambodian border to the outskirts of Saigon itself. The communist fighters – and many villagers – lived down there like rats while the B-52s carpet-bombed the jungle above. A couple of the tunnels have been widened so that fat American tourists can go down, from what I saw, the irony seemed lost on most of them.

One of the most dangerous roads during the war – Highway One, down to the Mekong Delta – is now a tourist route. It blasts through the most productive rice paddies in the world (paddles Vietnamese love so much they're buried in them). The swirling brown river, strewn with hyacinths, splits into a thousand canals and tributaries and lays down millions of tons of silt picked up on its long journey from Tibet.

We went in a deluxe sampan with couches to recline on while viewing the villages and the floating markets; the trip topped off by lunch in solitary splendour at a French colonial-style mansion by the side of one of the canals.

Vietnam is an exciting place, with much of the charm of Thailand but less problematic and lawdry. Its terrible history has, so far, kept it mostly unspoiled by tourism and, goodness knows, is compelling in itself.

Listening to north Vietnamese music on the way back to Saigon, our guide suddenly said: "There you are. It's all in the music. The north's songs were all about victory; the south's were all about the girls pining at home. No wonder we lost."

In the end, I am not sure they did.

VIETNAM BASICS

Climate Tropical – but this 2,000-mile-long country has three distinct climatic zones. The south is hot and humid year round, with daytime temperatures in the 80s-90s. The central area is subject to typhoons from July to November. And the far north, around Sapa, can become chilly enough from November to April for a sweater and jacket, even seeing occasional snowfall.

When to go November to March is high season, but the period visitors might want to



avoid is the Tet holiday, February 14-17, next year. Marking the new year (2010 is year of the Tiger), Tet sees the whole country on the move – roads clogged, hotels packed – as families reunite and celebrate.

Getting there There are no direct flights from Britain. Flying via Tokyo is an option, with daily Virgin Atlantic flights to Tokyo from Heathrow from £660 in economy, including taxes and fares, and from £3,350 in

The \$65-million new Nam Hai hotel near Hoi An
Upper Class (08448 747 747, www.viagnathaitic.com). Vietnam Air (www.vietnamair.com) connects from Tokyo to Hanoi and Saigon. Black Tomato does tailor-made tours from £1,999, with the itinerary Michael Buerk followed costing from £6,395pp, including flights, transfers, guide, two nights in Hanoi, four in Nam Hai, one on a junk, two on the Victoria Express, and two in Saigon (020 7426 9888, www.blacktomato.co.uk).

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