

24 HOURS text and photos by Summer Block

day-tripping in hơ chí minh city

a not-so-quiet American tours finds a patchwork of cultures



District One



Ao dai

ho Chi Minh City (or Saigon) is an alluring patchwork of traditions and histories. Walk down any street and you are likely to find French pastries, Chinese statuary and, of course, Vietnamese food, clothing and culture, itself a mix of many indigenous ethnic groups. Here are some key stops that showcase the best of the many influences that make up modern Saigon.

8am: Start your morning with a bowl of pho, a delicate noodle soup seasoned with fresh basil, bean sprouts, cilantro, lime and mint. Or, go continental and pick up a fresh croissant or baguette at one of the city's many street stalls. Wash it down with Vietnam's signature strong, sweet coffee.

9am: Wander through District One, starting at the famous intersection of Lê Lợi and Đồng Khởi where the Continental Hotel stands, the site of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. The downtown area is filled with historic sites, including the lovely Notre Dame Cathedral. This 19th-century Romanesque monument is still in active use, as evidenced by the many votive candles burning inside.

12pm: Get front row seats at Com Niêu Sài Gòn and watch deft waiters as they toss terracotta pots into the air and smash them with a hammer, revealing the baked rice inside. Once the mess is cleared

away, tuck into treats like fresh spring rolls and stuffed snail shells.

2pm: Newly energized from lunch, get ready to fight the crowds at the Ben Thanh Market, where you can find everything from traditional Vietnamese handicrafts to video games. Tailors are on hand to tuck and fit your own ao dai, the stylish silk tunic and pajama pant sets worn by Vietnamese women.

4:30pm: If you still have any money left in your wallet, take it over to the Nam Son lacquer workshop. Friendly tour guides are on hand to walk you through the process of making Vietnamese lacquerware, from ground egg shells, shellac and mother-of-pearl all the way to the gleaming finished product. Be warned – your guide will be sure to steer you into the on-site store at tour's end.

6pm: Bring your friends – or make some new ones – at Ngọc Suong Marina Seafood Restaurant, where the long picnic bench seats are packed every day with families and friends enjoying a profusion of fresh seafood. Live music and a tent-awning roof complete the party atmosphere.

8pm: After the happy chaos inside the restaurant, take a relaxing stroll through Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown. The Chinese influence is obvious at the graceful Thien Hau Temple, where thin streams

of incense smoke float through the open, pagoda-style roofs.

10:30pm: Wind up your day at the famous Saigon Saigon bar, on the top floor of the Caravelle Hotel. Once the watering hole for influential expatriates and foreign correspondents, Saigon Saigon commands a lovely nighttime view of the city, especially from a table on the balcony. ■

sleep

Park Hyatt Saigon
2 Lam Son Square, District 1
(+84 8 824 1234, saigon.park.hyatt.com)
Intimate, elegant hotel with friendly service and stylish amenities in a convenient central location.

eat

Com Nieu Saigon
59 Ho Xuan Huong Street, District 3
(+84 8 930 2888)
Ngoc Suong Marina Seafood Restaurant
19C Le Qui Don, District 3
(+84 8 930 4209)
Saigon Saigon
Caravelle Hotel, 10F, 19 Lam Son Square
(+84 8 823 3479)

play

Ben Thanh Market
Between Le Loi, Ham Nghi,
Tran Hung Dao and Le Lai streets
Thien Hau Temple
710 Nguyen Trãi