



Good morning VIETNAM



Mopeds are the transport of choice, but pedestrians need to be cautious.



Nam Hai's villas are the perfect way to relax by the pool.



Many bargains can be had in Vietnam's street markets.



The architecture and relics are a must for history buffs.

THE BACKPACKER'S HAVEN IS TRANSFORMING INTO A LOW-COST LUXURY GETAWAY, FULL OF RESORTS, GREAT FOOD AND TAILORED FASHION

I am no Asia newbie. I've talked my way out of sticky situations in Thailand. I've traversed Siberia in the dead of winter on a shower-less train for six days. I've lost my passport in Taiwan and nearly starved to death in China. But nothing in my travels prepared

me for the monumental task of crossing the street in Vietnam. You remember the video game Frogger, where the little frog tries to hop between lanes of blistering traffic to reach the other side of the street? It's like that, but without the lanes. You have to time your moment of departure perfectly – one minuscule miscalculation and the headline will read, 'Another Crazy Tourist Disintegrated in Moped Pasting.' Scary. That's my first impression of Hanoi and I assume it would be no different in Ho Chi Minh City or any other urban centre in Vietnam. The traffic is best described as otherworldly, as in a world where pedestrians have gone extinct. But I didn't come here to die – I came here to buy a bespoke suit, custom tailored to my proportions at a fraction of the Western price,

and then I plan to lay low in the first of several new five-star resorts that are transforming this Asian gem from a ramshackle backpacker's stamping ground into a playground for the well-to-do. But first, some grub. I'd heard a lot about one of Vietnam's most famous dishes, Bun Cha, a Northern Vietnamese lunchtime treat, so I was on a mission and it led me to Bun Cha Dac Kim on Hang Manh Road (OK, so the guide book led me there). Dac Kim is a wildly popular two-storey madhouse of communal tables catering to both locals and tourists. There is no menu. You get Bun Cha. You die happy. For the uninitiated, Bun Cha is usually translated as rice vermicelli with grilled pork and spring rolls, but I soon learn that translation doesn't do anybody any favours. When the dish arrives, a brothy

bowl of thin white noodles sits before me. Alongside, gorgeous accompaniments that include fresh garlic, lime, spicy orange peppers, and fragrant greens. Next to that, a plate of delectable spring rolls. I have no clue how to eat it, but my first attempt goes down with the kind of glee that comes from hitting street food jackpot, drawing uncontrollable snickers from a nearby 10-year-old. I soldier on, dumping condiments in the broth, dipping the spring rolls in and mixing. Finally, the girl can hold back no longer. She walks over, points out to me that my chopsticks are mismatched and upside down, and before I embarrass myself further, proceeds with an impromptu lesson in proper stick-eating etiquette. It is a meal to remember, all for \$3.20.

At Dac Kim there is no menu. You eat Bun Cha. You die happy

Hoi An is a UNESCO World Heritage village not far from China Beach. This ancient town, a sort of Southeast Asian Venice, is home to 400 custom tailors – one for every 220 people – so it's the spot in Vietnam to get your digs made to order. The yellowed, antiquated architecture and well-preserved Chinese and Japanese relics are only overshadowed by the plethora of custom threads and spools of silk in storefront after storefront of old-school clothiers offering to revamp your wardrobe for a fraction of the Western price. Before I arrived in Hoi An, I combed fashion magazines for a suit that popped out at me. Tailors here can copy every little detail from virtually any photo you bring in, so come prepared – a few ripped pages from GQ can go a long way towards the style you're looking for. I make my way to 41 Leloi, a well-respected midrange option. Upon arrival, cute women approach and guide me through

the choices (fabrics, colours, cuts – it's daunting). They are there to help, but if you're like me and know virtually nothing about fabric, you'll be shell-shocked. After many excruciating minutes of indecisiveness, we agree on a style and strike a deal – \$190 and delivery to my resort, the Nam Hai, by 8am the next day. Locked in between Hoi An and a patch of central Vietnam's China Beach known as Ha My, the Nam Hai is merely the first of no less than six high-end resorts that are under construction along a 14-mile stretch of former militarised coastline. Nam Hai's 40 hotel pool villas overlook a picture-perfect stretch of sand, the South China Sea, and the nearby Cham Islands, where a Four Seasons is being erected – all of which are spectacularly displayed across the top of the property's three gorgeous sequenced swimming pools designed by French architect Reda Amalou.

Some 3000 imported palm trees outline the 80sqm villas fashioned from calming Cho Chi wood and blue stones. Inside, crushed eggshell soaker tubs adjacent to raised canopied beds all look out past typhoon-proof deck furniture to the beach and beyond. It's here that I wait for my new suit, so I can spruce myself up, if this is going to be the kind of company I'm keeping from here on out. Backpacks in Vietnam? I'm afraid they are disappearing into the heart of darkness.

TO GO For more information on things to see and do in Vietnam, visit www.vietnamtourism.com. Singapore Airlines has regular flights from New Zealand to Ho Chi Minh City via Singapore. For more information visit www.singaporeair.co.nz.



Bun Cha is delicious, even if you don't know how to use chopsticks.

TRAVEL BARGAINS FOR NEW IDEA READERS



QUEENSTOWN HOME

● Nestled in the Queensland foothills, Alta Apartments is a true home-away-from-home experience. Each apartment features modern appliances, entertainment systems and more. Enjoy stunning views of The Remarkables and Lake Wakatipu. The Two Bedroom Lake View apartment can fit up to four people and is down to \$275 per night from \$400, minimum two-night stay. For information visit www.wotif.com/hotelW50742.

GO CAMPING

● Family Parks' Go Camp 08 is New Zealand's biggest weekend of free camping, with caravan parks and camping grounds all across the country offering free booking on February 22 and 23. Each park will have a variety of activities for both kids and adults. Whether you own a luxury caravan or a tent and sleeping bag, you can enjoy a fun and safe weekend. Bookings can be made directly with your caravan park of choice. Visit www.familyparks.co.nz for a list of participating parks.

RAROTONGA BREAK

● Stay five nights and pay for four with the new offer from Puaikura Reef Lodges & Bungalow in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. With everything from studio units to three-bedroom bungalows, on offer it's perfect for singles, couples or big families. Availability is limited for this offer, so book early. Visit www.jasons.com/hotdeal.