

INDOCHINA GIRL

THERE'S NO MORE ALLURING PLACE TO CUT A DASH RIGHT NOW THAN VIETNAM, BUT WHERE SHOULD YOU STAY?
CHARLOTTE SINCLAIR HAS THE LOWDOWN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BETTINA LEWIN. STYLED BY FIONA LINTOTT







Vietnam had seven million tourists last year. Bangkok alone had 10 million. It's no wonder then, despite all the chitchat, that Vietnam still feels like a secret, a place of calm and quiet exploration. Except, of course, for Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, urban centres of enlivening thrum and bustle where motorbikes pour through the streets. Elsewhere, there's a fresh sense of discovery, of renewal. This entire cedilla-shaped country is lapped by the waters of the South China Sea, and the beaches alone are worth the journey (now easier, with direct Vietnam Airlines flights from Gatwick). The much-ignored central coast is dotted with small, charming hotels evincing a new talent for luxury (and the old talent for hospitality) plus a growing number of big-name players including the Banyan Tree Lang Co (see The Hot List, page 81). From north to south, the buzz about the place is palpable.

SOFITEL LEGEND METROPOLE

Where am I? Right in the middle of Hanoi
What's the vibe? Old-school colonial charm

This is Hanoi's historic heart: a white-painted, green-shuttered confection of a hotel where Noël Coward, Somerset Maugham and Charlie Chaplin congregated. The Sofitel group has done a magnificent job of restoring the 100-year-old building to its former glory – as described on its history trail, featuring pictures of the air-raid shelter under the pool, the terrace café and those former guests, as well as Angelina Jolie, the unofficial mascot of these parts. There are bellboys in pillbox hats, smiling girls in red velvet áo dài, a moody, acquired bar serving Martinis, comfortable rooms decorated with carved-wood screens, and banisters polished to a gleam. A marble chandelier sheds golden light over the lobby and its lively mix of grey gappers, war veterans, expats and young couples. There are three restaurants, including Le Beaulieu (for beef fillet, big gas and Dover sole, a taste of Hanoi's French past), which has its own bona fide Gallic head chef. Of course it does: they do things right here or not at all. www.sofitel.com. Doubles from about £150.

PREMIUM VALENTINE

Where am I? Halong Bay, three hours' drive from Hanoi
What's the vibe? Smart sailing among the limestone karst

Halong Bay is a wonder of the world: a wide skirt of pewter water pierced by thousands of jagged islands. The way to explore the area is by boat, but this is where it gets tricky. Do you want to be stuck on a cruiser with a dozen dawn-rising shutterbugs? Or a brace of boozed-up backpackers? No, you'd rather sail away on your very own antique junk, the Premium Valentine. This two-berth vessel is one of the prettiest in the bay. Its teak-lined cabins are remarkably spacious, with picture windows so you can spend a lazy morning island-spotting in bed. The clever thing to do is to fill the other cabin with family or friends and then plot a course to secluded, mist-wreathed inlets where yours is the only boat for miles. The food is local and hearty: huge seafood lunches, spicy stir-fries and piles of fresh fruit; but the five staff don't bat an eyelid if you ask for French fries rather than *mì* for supper. Best of all, you can drop anchor at will and leap straight into the South China Sea. www.indschinatails.com. From £399 per cabin for a two-day, one-night cruise.

ANA MANDARA HUE

Where am I? Just outside Hue, on the coast between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City
What's the vibe? Laid-back beach villas

The imperial city of Hue – a walled citadel of age-blackened buildings, pagoda roofs and carved-iron staircases – is one of the main sights of central Vietnam. But, until recently, there's been little more than backpacker joints or conference hotels to stay in (lovely La Residence being the exception). Ana Mandara, a mid-range hotel with big ambitions, is a welcome addition, 20 minutes from the city in the village of Thuan An, where chickens and children scatter along the street. The surprise comes at the end of the well-tended garden of fig and frangipani trees: the beach, a stretch of golden sand where you can walk for three hours without encountering anyone other than the old stray fisherman. The sea, so glassy in summer, can be a brute in winter – rolling waves have tashed in the low sea wall and taken a bite out of the lawn. Don't be put off: it'll be repaired in time

Opposite: a lake pavilion at the Tomb of Tu Duc near Hue. Dress, £3,400. Celine at Harrods (+44 20 7730 1234). Boots, £1,350. Roger Vivier (cont). Ring, £2,940. Omega

Below: cycling through rice paddies. Jacket, £675. Marni (+44 20 7245 9520). Bracelet, £345. Celine at Harrods (+44 20 7730 1234). Shirts, £620. Ermanno Scerifano at Harrods (as before). Boots, model's own

Previous pages: left, on the road to Hue. Dress, £1,250. Mulberry (www.mulberry.com). Sandals, £1,320. Tabitha Simmons (www.matchesfashion.com). Bracelets from £1,802. Shamballa at Harrods (+44 20 7730 1234). Ring, £2,940. Omega (www.omegawatches.com). Right, at the Tomb of Tu Duc. Cut-out top, £1,070; skirt, £1,735; both Akris (www.akris.ch). Cuff, £362. Bjerg at Salt boutique (+44 20 7590 9756). Earrings, £138. Lizzie Fortunato at Salt boutique (as before). Ring, £2,940. Omega (as before).





Above, on Tuyen Lam Lake. Satin top, £960, trousers, £515, both **Prada** (+44 20 7647 5000). Gold cuff, £445, **Celine** at Harrods (+44 20 7730 1234). *Right*, a courtyard in Hue's Imperial City

Opposite, boating on the lake. Lurex and cashmere gold top, £265, **Joseph** (www.joseph.co.uk). Leather pleated skirt, £1,674, **Marios Schwab** (www.matchesfashion.com). Ring, £2,940, **Omega** (www.omegawatches.com)

for the sun, and anyway the beach villas are where you want to be – with private pools, rosewood floors, outside showers shaded by bamboo, and living rooms hung with hill-tribe textiles. This is a real secret: one of the best beaches in Vietnam, yet no one realises it's here. www.anamandanhue.net. Doubles from about £55

VEDANA LAGOON RESORT & SPA

Where am I? 25 minutes' drive south of Hue

What's the vibe? Calm, quiet, lagoon-side living

On the lip of one of South-East Asia's largest lagoons, and backed by hills and a national park, the two-year-old Vedana is a low-key gem. The 20 thatched hill cottages (nine with private pools) are surrounded by a rainforest's worth of vegetation, and you're a loud shout away from your neighbour. Below, 10 villas with pink sandstone walls float on stilts over the water. The lagoon is more like a lake. Fed by the sea, it's bordered by a spine of hills that turn into smoky silhouettes at sunset, and there are fishing villages with ornate family cemeteries (well worth a look). You can take a longboat across the water to a slim cuticle of pale sand. Fishing skiffs slide over the beaten-silver surface leaving barely a ripple. Watch from your enormous bed, especially if you're in one of the over-water rooms, where marble floors lead to a breakfast terrace, the bath is a grey-marble egg, and the shower is alfresco. For all the mod cons, this is not a club sandwich kind of place. Rather, it's a small, off-map spot with a slower way of life. Cycle along palm-dappled paths from tennis court to spa to pool, where tiki-style parasols and a thatched bar create a Balinese vibe. A charming (and charmed) find. www.vedanalagoon.com. Doubles from about £75

FUSION MAIA

Where am I? Seaside Da Nang

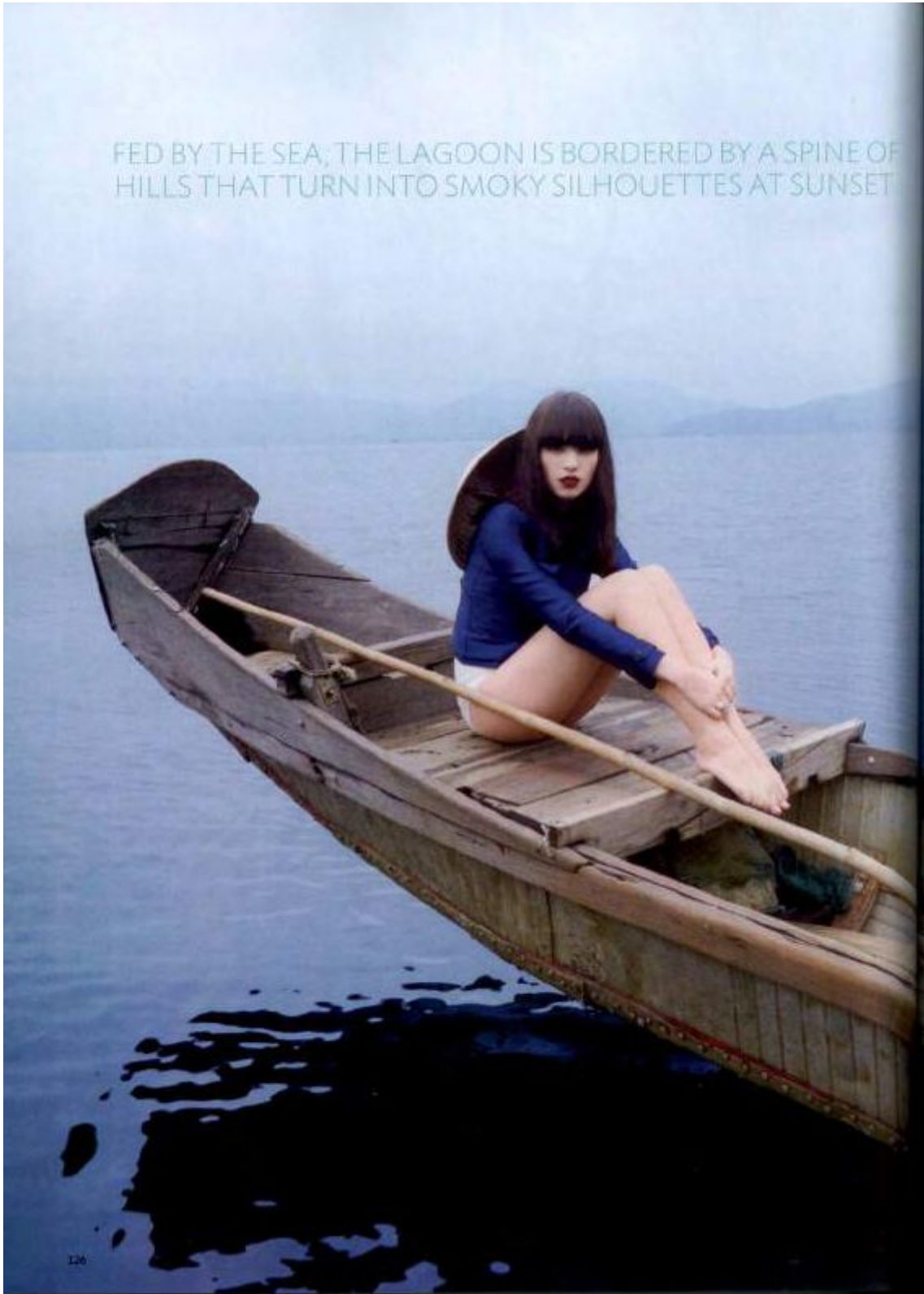
What's the vibe? Spa-centric, feel-good, healthy hotspot

Da Nang's hotel scene is becoming a little like Mexico's Riviera Maya: drive the main road to Hoi An and big-name resorts line the road facing the white-sand beach, while trucks trundle between construction sites. Fusion Maia aims to offer something a little different, billing itself as the country's first spa resort. Healthy living equates to healthy eating here, though without any accompanying sense of deprivation. With the aptly named chef Yum, you can taste your way through the local markets – a headily scented colour-burst of exotic fruit and vegetables. There's early morning tai chi on Marble Mountain, one of the naturally occurring

PLOT A COURSE TO SECLUDED, MIST-WREATHED INLETS
WHERE YOURS IS THE ONLY BOAT FOR MILES



FED BY THE SEA, THE LAGOON IS BORDERED BY A SPINE OF HILLS THAT TURN INTO SMOKY SILHOUETTES AT SUNSET





On Vidana Lagoon. Satin jacket, £1,393, **Burberry Prorsum** (www.burberry.com)
Shorts, £245, **Ermano Scervino** (+44 20 7235 0558)
Ring, £2,940, **Omega** (www.omegawatches.com)

marble formations sticking straight out of the flat landscape. And there are bicycles to explore the islands off Hoi An, all interlinked by rickety bridges. On your return, try one of the complimentary spa treatments, including chakra-balancing massages. www.fusionmaidanang.com. Doubles from about £215

LIFE HERITAGE RESORT HOI AN

Where am I? Bustling UNESCO World Heritage Site

What's the vibe? Water's-edge mansion

Hoi An is perhaps the most magical town in all of central Vietnam – a 16th-century trading post once populated by French, Chinese and Japanese merchants. Its old quarter floats next to the thick, green Thu Bon River, and from its banks old ladies in conical hats squat deftly in wooden canoes, tempting tourists away from the terrace cafés and rooftop restaurants for a boat ride. Lined with attractively decaying, tile-roofed buildings with louvered windows and chipped yellow plaster, these lovely pedestrianised streets are film-set perfect and amazing for shopping. Avoid the jade bracelets and tatty T-shirts and head to Yaly Couture for silk pyjamas in a Miu Miu-esque print. All of this is a five-minute bike ride from Life Heritage Resort, a riverside colonial-style new-build open since 2003 and renovated in 2008. Each room has a terrace facing either the internal gardens and lily ponds set with floating lanterns (like those that drift down the river at night) or the river with its passing traffic of painted longboats. Rooms are simple but comfortable, with sofas and patterned silk cushions. It's attractive and unpretentious, with staff who are unfailingly efficient and friendly. The tiled, French-influenced Heritage Bar is packed with revellers nightly. www.life-resorts.com. Doubles from about £110

BAI TRAM HIDEAWAY RESORT

Where am I? Tucked away in a private bay south of Qui Nhon

What's the vibe? Properly peaceful hideaway

Bai Tram is a place of such rare beauty you just can't believe you haven't heard of it before. The hotel has been here for five years yet remains neatly under the radar. Maybe that's because getting to it is a bit of a mission. A sandy, bumpy track (more bump than track) leads past shacks with tin roofs aflame with bougainvillea; past a wide mouth of blue water and a rickety bamboo bridge; past shrimp farms and velvet-eyed cows. The road ascends to the entrance, where you climb out of the car to take in the view: a 100-hectare sweep of creamy white sand and green bush encircled by hills, remote and stunning. In the valley behind the beach there's a rice paddy filled with shimmering water, and a lotus pond in the depths of which a French merchant – the 18th-century occupant of the ruin that pokes through the tree line – found real, actual treasure (it's that sort of place). There are only seven villas (thatched palm, adobe walls) plus a spa and lobby. And that's it. The low-rise buildings lie in the crook of a cliff at the eastern end of the beach. The rest is natural, wild beauty, tamed only in part by the gravel paths that wind past dry stream beds. Supper, in the restaurant/lobby/bar space where wicker chairs sit next to a ornamental pool, is fresh and local: shrimp and lotus salad, fish wrapped in banana leaf, all eaten beneath a black-silk sky pricked with stars. www.bai-tram.vn. Doubles from about £150

AN LAM NINH VAN BAY

Where am I? North of Nha Trang, on a secluded beach

What's the vibe? Private-island philosophy

On your speedboat approach to An Lam Ninh Van Bay, skidding across lizard-green waves past the floating, tinderstick cabins of lobster fishermen, it's tricky to spot the hotel. The 35 reed-thatched villas are embedded within the landscape, disguised by strands of eucalyptus, pine and jungle canopy. Some are set back from the curving rim of white sand beach, some face the smoky lagoon, others are reached by a ladder of steps up into the trees, where gemstone-feathered birds trill and flitter. Instead of seeing architectural intrusions here, your eye focuses on the brilliant bay, the mountains studded with boulders and waterfalls, the bright coin of water. An Lam is joined to the mainland by a narrow spit, but the place has an island sensibility, a castaway intent. It might have butlers on tap, but the ethos remains delightfully unfussy. Carved wooden signs direct guests to the kitchen garden, the gym and the spa, where rooms are reached via stepping-stones over a stream. Khaki-grey walls are offset by russet-coloured Indonesian wood and panels embroidered with dragonflies. A plunge pool is shaded by blossom trees; a white daybed floats on ropes from the ceiling; and in the bathroom there's a swing! An Lam has a go-getting spirit. You can steer a kayak to secret bays, or walk into the hills to scabble through brush and bush, with knockout views as your prize. www.anlam.com/anlam. Doubles from about £370



Above, a rickshaw in Hanoi's imperial City, a World Heritage Site

Opposite, at the Tomb of Tu Duc: Jacket, £1,460; skirt, £820, both Miu Miu (+44 20 7409 0900). Belt, £389, Sophia Kokosalaki (www.sophiakokosalaki.com). Fan wedges, £650, Nicholas Kirkwood (+44 20 7290 1404)

Hair and make-up, Dimitri Theer using M'AC. Model, Anna Brewster at Union Models. Fashion assistant, Rachel Ingram. With thanks to Vedana Lagoon Resort & Spa (www.vedanalagoon.com) and Vietnam Airlines (www.vietnamairlines.com)

SIX SENSES NINH VAN BAY

Where am I? North of Nha Trang

What's the vibe? Barefoot eco-luxe

In the pantheon of Six Senses hotels, Ninh Van Bay most resembles the brand's Maldivian motherhip, Soneva Fushi, and since its arrival here in 2004, it's been responsible for an entirely new mode of Vietnam travel: whispering smartness. (The group recently opened an equally spoiling resort on Côn Đảo island in the south.) Low-key but high-style, the 58 sun-bleached villas include thatched bungalows with private beach access, hillside hideouts, and water villas built in, on, over and around the huge grey stones that fringe the shoreline. The latter are incredibly romantic, with rock pools to swim in, roped walkways, sliding screens, and the sight – and sound – of the chipped-emerald ocean as a constant backdrop. Interiors are wood-panelled, wood-floored, thatch-roofed – simple, spacious and elegant, with just the right level of modern intervention (a huge boat of a bathtub; white-linen daybeds). And the focus is on re-balancing: hence the attention to detail in the organic garden that grows herbs, vegetables, fruits and flowers, for use in the incense-fragranced spa as well as the restaurant. www.sixsenses.com. Doubles from about £315

AN LAM SAIGON RIVER

Where am I? On the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City

What's the vibe? Riverside retreat

The newest member of the An Lam family is at a peaceful remove from the honking, heaving traffic of the city but only a 15-minute speedboat ride away when you want to plunge back into the fray. The property faces the river, where wooden punks chug up and down almost as fast as the wild grasses that migrate with the tides. An Lam is small but dreamy. Villas are deftly smart, with slate-tiled bathrooms to match the slate-tiled pools. The gardens are a marvel, fecund to the point of parody – camellia trees in bud, spiky birds of paradise, fan palms – and the hotel makes good use of them, positioning loungers and love seats all about. There's a chic restaurant that juts out over the water, where you can sit beneath 75-year-old trees that weep creepers, and watch the sun dip with a Caipirinha. www.anlam.com/sgr. Doubles from about £310

THE JAHAN

Where am I? On the Mekong River at Ho Chi Minh City

What's the vibe? Raj-era cruising

The Jahan is an exquisite vessel that sails up and down the Mekong between Siem Reap in Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh City. Built locally in 2010 and hand-finished in Indian-colonial style with murals, block-printed fabrics and four-poster beds, it is a floating boutique hotel with spa, swimming pool, restaurant and 26 cabins, each with its own private balcony. You can eat and drink well, relax and even learn on the Jahan, with on-board themed films (*Good Morning, Vietnam!*; *Indochine*), talks, a library and sunrise 'ai chi sessions; but above all you touch the Vietnamese life that is so beguiling and yet so inscrutable from the road. Guide Nguyen Aue Minh Tue has concocted a programme that takes you not only into temples and markets but also to community centres, farms and homes. In between, you can sit on your balcony and watch banana boats, floating shops, net-casters and water-hyacinth harvesters as you drift along. www.heritage-line.com. From about £750 per cabin for a two-night cruise

GETTING THERE

Cleveland Collection (+44 20 7843 3531; www.clevelandcollection.co.uk) offers a 13-night holiday in Vietnam from £2,795 per person, including return flights with Vietnam Airlines, private transfers and accommodation with breakfast at a selection of the hotels featured.

