never let me go

Why we won’t say goodbye to our childhood toys
Stylist’s digital writer Megan Murray is won over by Vietnam’s views, food, culture and coffee

Standing under an outdoor shower surrounded by tropical palms, staring out at a private infinity pool that kisses the beach, I realise: “Maybe Vietnam is for me after all.”

I’d never ventured outside Europe before I agreed to take a last-minute trip to Vietnam for a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it three days. Partly thanks to my inability to stop buying Kitt dresses and put enough money aside for a long-haul flight, and partly because of my belief that with 44 different cultures on my doorstep in Europe, I’ve always had everything I ever needed right (about) here.

Landing in Hanoi airport, hair stuck clammy to my face, I feared I’d been right all along. Travelling through the city, I watched in horror as mopeds cut each other up, children balanced (without helmets) on parents’ knees and a woman pedalled faster than a SoulCycle instructor with an entire blossom tree wedged between her legs. Vietnam and all its hectic charm was a culture shock.

From Hanoi I flew south, down the country to Quy Nhon, an ancient province with rugged natural beauty and those velvety sandy beaches you only see in honeymoon brochures. I’d never heard of Anantara, a luxury hotel collection that specialises in boutique-style accommodation, so I had no idea what to expect from my home for the next few days. On reflection, this made the surprise of seeing where I was staying all the sweeter. Like, jump-up-and-down-on-the-bed sweeter.

The Anantara Quy Nhon resort has 26 luxury villas, half of which sit right on the beach so you can stop out of the aforementioned private infinity pool (I still can’t get over it) and straight onto the sand, and are half embedded into the hillside behind, with the benefit of killer...
views. Each villa has a four-poster poolside bed, perfect for reading in the sun, and inside, a free-standing bath which allows you to gaze at the sea through floor-to-ceiling glass as you soak.

Within the resort there’s lots to do, from martial arts on the beach to morning yoga, but a standout moment for me was the fairy-lit dinner in a secluded cove. Sitting there in complete privacy out of sight from the main resort, enveloped by the inky black night and the sound of the waves, felt like a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I know that living in London, where light pollution is at its worst, makes me easily impressed, but this was dining under the stars like I’ve never known.

And then there’s the jungle spa. Accessible only by picking your way through a fern-lined path, it sits high on the cliff overlooking the sea, peeking through swathes of plants. The treatment rooms are so big you could do car wheels in them and feature impressive retractable glass walls, so that when you take a milk bath (€41) or receive a signature full body massage (€105), it’s with the best view your Instagram story will have ever been privy to.

But it’s not all about spa treatments and sunning yourself on the deck – the resort also offers cultural immersion so you can explore the local area and see awe-inspiring historic landmarks. Jump on the back of a motorbike and set off on the Quy Nhon Explorer tour (€91), stopping off at the Banh It Towers, one of the best-preserved examples of 8th-century Cham architecture built by the ancient Cham people as a place of worship. We also got an insight into the life of young monks today as we quietly crept around the Thien Hung Pagoda; an ornate Buddhist temple where visitors can receive blessings and wander the gardens, as the children who have been taken in by the temple watch us with excited curiosity.

To manage the jet lag, our caffeine fix was delivered in the sweetest way possible at a traditional Vietnamese cafe in the closest town, where coffee is served dark and strong with condensed milk. It’s heaven.

Pret is missing a trick. To follow this, we were guided to a nearby ramshackle-looking eatery for lunch called Truc Hao. To be honest, when I spotted the precariously balanced corrugated metal roof and the tree growing through the middle of the room, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But what I experienced was one of those unassuming local gems that absolutely floors your taste buds.

Over a small stove, the women who work in the restaurant (I’ll use that term extremely loosely) cooked us Vietnamese pancakes stuffed with tasty prawns and wrapped in rice paper, and I’ve been craving them ever since.

This wasn’t the only culinary triumph I experienced on the trip, though. The following day we visited Bong Binh, a fishing village that sits on stilts above the sea, where the contents of slightly unsealing buckets full of squirming fish were delivered straight to our plates with an unparalleled freshness.

Sat on the floor surrounded by Vietnamese families enjoying their Sunday feasts, I’d never felt further from home, and – do you know what? – I loved it. Europe, I think you’ve got some competition.

Villas at Anantara Quy Nhon start from £382 per night including breakfast; anantara.com. Return flights from London to Quy Nhon via Hanoi from £495 per person; vietnamairlines.com

These tucked-away spas offer alternative ways to relax surrounded by nature

Don’t fancy flying halfway across the world to experience wellness in the wilderness? Just jump on a train to this five-star hotel in Hampshire instead. As well as the main house, Chewton Glen is famous for its collection of high-end treehouses, all of which come with hot tubs and have in-house spa treatment options so you needn’t leave your terrace to enjoy your massage.

Treehouse studio suites for two from £950 per night, including breakfast; chewtonglen.com

This luxury hotel in the Maldives has recently launched safari-style tents that give guests a castaway experience at the heart of the resort’s tropical jungle. Choose to be pampered inside your villa looking out to the flora and fauna beyond your window or ask your therapist to take things outside and enjoy a massage under the stars.

Jungle villas for four from £9,299 for seven nights, return flights and half board; fairmont.com

Escape to the forests of southwest France at this fairy-tale chateau with five treehouse spas in its grounds. Each one allows you to relax on your own terms, with a private chromotherapy sauna and hot tub. Recline on the treetop decking, soak in a free-standing bath, and if you do fancy venturing back down to earth, check out the infinity pool.

Treehouse for two from £234 per night; chateaux-dans-les-arbres.com