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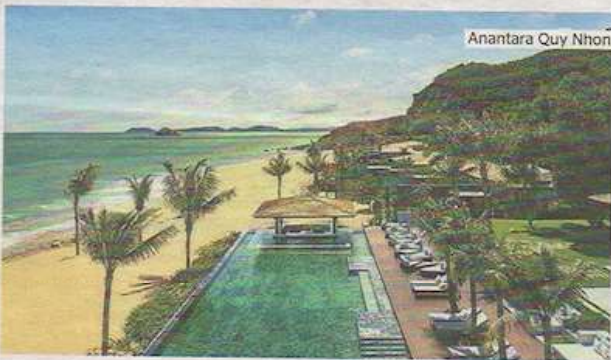


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Anantara Quy Nhon

Hip Vietnam: the hot new places to stay

Sean Thomas checks in to a castle in the mountains and a secret beach sanctuary

Gecko or penis? No, really: gecko or penis? I must have lived a sheltered life because it's not a question I have addressed before, but now I have to confront this vicious dilemma.

With only the slightest hesitation, I mumble my answer: "Penis."

Well it had to be, didn't it? My declaration duly arouses a small cheer, which is swiftly drowned out by the rumble of an urban train rattling down the road, two yards from the door of this splendidly ramshackle bar, hidden away in the kinetic, mazy, twilight streets of central Hanoi in Vietnam.

Smiling broadly, the barman pours me and my fellow tourists several shot glasses of rice wine steeped in seal penis, and we all knock them back with the traditional Vietnamese salutation: "Mo, hai, ba, yo!" Which apparently means: "One, two, three, yay." Then we have another inch of penis, a glass or two of scorpion and gecko hooch, a nibble of some water buffalo jerky, and we put on our helmets and climb on our Vespas, behind our drivers and guides (a tandem moped tour such as this is a great way to see the city). Soon we are veering with exhilarating speed past Ho Chi Minh's floodlit mausoleum, heading for the next surprise food and drink stop.

I don't know if it's the penis talking, but I am in a very good mood: I am clearly warming to Vietnam. This is useful, because I am about to embark on a whirlwind tour of the entire country, north to south, Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, taking in two just-opened yet already celebrated

hotels in between. My new enthusiasm for Vietnam is also a little surprising, because my first impression of the northern capital Hanoi, when I arrived this morning, was waaaay less positive.

Why? Maybe it was the fog (Hanoi gets properly grey and rainy in our winter, although not as cold as the UK). Maybe it was the pollution. Maybe it was the general outlying cityscape: scruffy, humdrum and with a jarring architectural mix of what look like Miami coke dealers' villas, alongside parades of bleak iron shacks.

Not a brilliant start. Since my arrival, however, Hanoi has worked a kind of magic. I have begun to admire the youthful energy of the place, especially in the intimate, historic central neighbourhoods. I love the way the roast duck shop sits next to the coffin-maker, just as I love the colonial church, and the store that sells only mangos and radios, and the 15th-century Buddhist temple, and the many, many new coffee bars where laughing Vietnamese student girls finish their local bean espressos and climb on their Chinese motorbikes, then swerve into the endless traffic, trailing their tresses of raven-black hair.

Ah, the traffic. Give it a few hours and even Hanoi's anarchic roads begin to charm. OK, I'm still not entirely sure if they drive on the right or the left. All I know is that there's a definite art to crossing the street: it involves confidently stepping out into the mêlée of mopeds and Mercedes and trusting the drivers not to run you down.



Generally they won't. If you don't adopt this technique, you can be stuck on the wrong side of the road for hours. Maybe weeks. There are just possibly timid tourists from the Tyrol who've been trying to get over Bat Dan Street to that much-loved chicken restaurant since early 2008.

Now we are deep into the night, our Vespa tour of the city is done. We've tried summer spring rolls in backstreet bistros, we've drunk firewater in upmarket brasseries, we've sampled the delicious signature dish of pork noodle soup flavoured with papaya at the humble canteen Bun Cha, where the chef-turned-celebrity Anthony Bourdain once supped with Barack Obama (the table they used has been encased in a glass vitrine). And now I'm sitting with my new friends in the Eden Roof Garden, overlooking a noisy square where after-Mass worshippers pour out of the city's Catholic cathedral (Vietnam is surprisingly religious).

As we guzzle coffee-beer — a mix of coffee and beer — we listen to our guide, an affable young man called Finn, as he talks about the very different life his parents knew. His mother spent her first five years in a refugee camp made entirely of concrete; she saw her first tree at the age of six and had to ask her mother what it was.

"Today is all change," he concludes, with a smile, pointing to the happy crowds of beer drinkers and strolling churchgoers. "Shall we have some nem chua? They're fermented pork rolls with banana leaf." Next morning, only mildly hungover

and superbly well fed, I quit Hanoi with reluctance (it definitely deserves at least two of your days). Soon I am speeding through drizzly, industrialised flatlands into the green paddy fields and the distant blue hills. I'm en route to one of the most eagerly awaited hotels in Indo-China.

It's called the Legacy Yen Tu, it's designed by the hotel starchitect Bill Bensley, and it sits in the shadow of the Yen Tu sacred mountain. Which is not only the holiest shrine in Vietnamese Buddhism, but also one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the country.

In peak season, such as the Tet new year in February, 100,000 people a day slog their way up to this summit (don't come in February). In the humid fogginess of mid-January my guide and I are virtually the only people in the cable cars, the only visitors to the snack shops, the only browsers in the many souvenir stalls selling Ho Chi Minh-embossed kitchenware.

If you're getting the impression that the Holy Mountain of Yen Tu doesn't feel All That Holy, you're right. Like many sacred Buddhist mountains in Indo-China, the whole place has been — to western tastes, at least — overdeveloped and made rather too convenient: a mixture of a theme park, ski station and the tatty end of Camden market. And the damn fog doesn't help.

By the time we reach a famous menhir, halfway up the mountain, which is said to represent the 3rd-century Chinese doctor who first discovered Yen Tu's religious feng shui, I can barely see my hand in front of my face. What was previously just irritating has become somewhat spooky. Invisible dogs are barking in the gloom.



A pool villa at Anantara Quy Nhon



A superior room at Legacy Yen Tu



Legacy Yen Tu

A couple of South Koreans are calling forlornly for their husbands, lost in the muck. Then, for a moment, the clouds part and I get a spectacular view down the forested valleys — and my first glimpse of the famous new hotel. And I think: "Ah, that's where I want to be."

My intuition is right. If Yen Tu the mountain disappoints (at least in misty weather, it's probably gorgeous in summer), Legacy Yen Tu the hotel does the opposite. It's a stunner. The hotel, in fact, is very much a reason to come here, all by itself. Surrounding a complex of decorous courtyards, Zen-quiet lily ponds, dragon-statued piazzas and excellent restaurants that look like geisha houses (and, soon, a gleaming new wing with swimming pool, gym, sauna etc) the glitzy yet exquisite architecture is inspired by the castles and palaces of Vietnam's 13th-century Tran Dynasty.

And that is exactly what the hotel feels like: simultaneously a castle and a palace. The lobby is a mighty pavilion decked with grand lanterns of silk and gongs of bronze, as well as gilded Chinese harps. The rooms are ranged down colonnaded naves, paved with slatework carved with imperial lotuses and guarded by squat and stylised stone lions. My twin bathroom sinks are made of rose-grey marble, hand-carved to resemble sacred chrysanthemums.

Sure, not everything is perfect. Service can be a bit slow: this is a remote part of Vietnam and the staff have largely been recruited from local rice farms. In the bar a simple gin and tonic can take ten confused minutes to arrive. Without ice. Or a slice. Or, on one notable occasion, gin.

But, really, this is nitpicking. Once the spa and pool are complete (this spring) and the staff are up to snuff, Legacy Yen Tu is going to be one of the most seductive hotels in southeast Asia.

Night-times are especially intoxicating. When the cicadas stop chirping, and the silence descends, and the stars shine down on the holy mountain, with its thousand-year-old pagodas, my advice is this: simply wander the hushed, mysterious yet imperious halls and courtyards. It's an enchanting sensation, as if you are living in a wildly immersive video game set in shogun-era Japan while sleeping in the Forbidden City.

All very impressive. Indeed, Legacy Yen Tu is so impressive I'm worried for my next destination, the Anantara Quy Nhon (a two-hour plane hop, down from Hanoi). How can it compete?

I needn't have worried, because the new Anantara is not even trying to compete. Where the Legacy is all about history, the Anantara QN is all about swish seaside modernity, on a comely yet unvisited chunk of tropical coast — hidden away between bustling Danang and touristic Nha Trang.

Architecturally, the hotel is a sequence of tasteful, linear, wood-and-slate villas, with a great gym, a tip-top restaurant with top-notch wine list (try the oysters and mango granita), and an enormous pool. By day these villas gaze on to five beautiful islets adorning the South China Sea. At night the same vast windows — and your private infinity pool — look out on to an obsidian black ocean arrayed with hundreds of tiny bobbing lights: these are the



A treatment room at the Anantara Quy Nhon spa

Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Experience Travel Group (020 3355 7873, experiencetravelgroup.com), which has a nine-night package, including stays at Legacy Yen Tu, MGallery by Sofitel (two nights), Anantara Quy Nhon (three nights) and two nights in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, along with Vietnam Airlines flights and transfers from £2,999pp

many squid fishermen of Quy Nhon. The effect is faintly magical, as if a cluster of constellations have come down for some skinny dipping. The scene is also proof positive that Quy Nhon is the real deal: a pukka working city, on a lovely bay, with pretty much zero tourists.

Really: zero. Take a tour around here, maybe to the wistful, 12th-century, bat-haunted Cham towers that dot the landscape, or down the jungly coastal road to one of the fishing hamlets built on stilts (where you must lunch in one of the famous seafood restaurants), and you'll probably be the only westerner. In fact, you'll probably be the only non-Vietnamese.

As for Quy Nhon city itself, it's a great insight into Vietnam the country and its breathtaking changes. In antiquity this region was pivotal. Quy Nhon was where, in the 13th century, the Vietnamese

defeated the Cham Empire and finally pushed back the Chinese. By the 1960s, Quy Nhon had become such an impoverished backwater, incoming American troops found an illiterate population that cured diseases by cutting themselves with shards of magical glass.

Today the city booms again, and where bombed-out refugees once slept on the sands during the Vietnam War, now the locals drink chilled Hue beer and scoff barbecued squid as the sun goes down over the jungled bay — and over the pristine beaches of Anantara Quy Nhon.

One more thing. Before you leave, take a trip to Quy Nhon's Cho Lam market. It's not for the faint-hearted, it's certainly not for vegans (time your tour badly and you might get splattered with blood when you pass the Eel Beheader). It is pungent, noisy, friendly, urgent, gloriously exotic and full of talkative smiley people selling ducks, chickens, rabbits, spices, pork intestines, weird potatoes, Chinese sneakers, squawking chickens, beautiful boughs of pink-violet peach blossom and bags of writhing snakes for making "porridge".

My last port of call is Ho Chi Minh City, or, as the locals call it, with increasing confidence, Saigon. What can I say in a few words? Here goes: the sun is broiling, the river is wide, the traffic is thick, communism is invisible, the skyscrapers soar, everyone seems to be 23, and the Vietnamese food is predictably brilliant (on my last evening I realise I haven't had a single bad meal in ten days). Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm heading out for a final cold beer, although I'll probably skip the penis. *Mo, hai, ba, yo!*