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VIETNAM

TWO WAYS

With two new burgeoning destinations to visit, great food and wonderful people, it's wise to get in quick before others discover Vietnam's hidden hotspots, writes **Kerrie McCallum**.



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POSTCARD.

QUY NHON

Pronounced 'qween-yon', this clean, green coastal town is the regional capital of Binh Dinh province in central Vietnam, a quiet but slowly burgeoning tourist hub. With some of the most beautiful coastline in the country, land to the south is being snapped up by luxury operators because of its pristine water (due to low levels of tourism), a fishing culture that produces fantastic seafood, and a relaxing vibe. There are very few Westerners around the wide boulevards, a beer costs about 50c if you know where to go, and there's an alley, called Dang Tran Con, devoted to karaoke.

Anantara opened Quy Nhon Villas (its third property in Vietnam) in late 2018. With 26 individual villas cut into the hillside, each with a plunge pool, and situated on a private beach, it's a small, quiet but luxurious offering. Fourteen of the villas have direct beach access, and the entire property is surrounded by seven acres of tropical gardens. During our stay development was underway on a neighbouring property, while the island opposite the resort had been sold to a luxury operator.

The spa and wellness offerings are strong. Daily yoga lessons, massages, or a good soak in a lemongrass-scented tub with stunning ocean views all tempt. We opt for a family martial arts class with Mr Phuc, the head of security who happens to be Quy Nhon's Viet Vo Dao master and a black belt. Donning matching black outfits with our pathetic white belts, we stagger around on the lawn trying to match him, skin shiny with sweaty frustration. Guests in the nearby pool sipping on cocktails giggle at us. We gratefully join them as soon as our sweltering lesson ends.

Anantara's restaurant, Sea.Fire.Salt, offers a good Vietnamese menu as well as abundant local seafood platters cooked on salt blocks. You can choose to sit in the restaurant or out on the pool deck, so you can dip in and out of the water in the languid heat. Anantara's signature Spice Spoons cooking classes are excellent, especially if your children learn how to cook pho or rice paper rolls for you back home. There's also a delicious pho station

for breakfast each day. Different experiences on offer include a barbecue set up in your villa, complete with executive chef – staff will set up a table strung with fairy lights on the beach while chefs cook nearby as the sun sets. The vistas are pretty spectacular. Proposals are common but it's the 'renewal of vows' package that is trending – express ceremonies are apparently a thing!

You can also spend a day out with local fishermen (or a night expedition for the brave). You'll see the squid trawlers' lights dotting the ocean each evening as you drift off to sleep. Mini bars are well stocked (with ice cream to local fruit to antipasto) and complimentary, which is helpful as there are no shops to hit up around the corner. Room service is thoughtful – we are too full to order dessert after dinner most nights and, without fail, someone arrives later at our villa with a sweet treat before bed.

If you want to venture out of the bubble, there are a few interesting experiences in close proximity. To the south sits Bai bien Xuan Hai, a small fishing village that supplies the country. Lobster pots anchor just off shore. Bong Beng restaurant is best during the day so you can soak up the view. It looks unprepossessing and floats on slats on the river, with the day's fresh catch floating in buckets and nets at your feet. You point to what you want, weigh it, then minutes later it arrives cooked simply but deliciously. Whole crabs or squid in garlic and chilli, juicy sea snails, mussels, lobster and a large steamed grouper piled high with a vermicelli salad. We sit on the floor with a few cans of beer, and for a feast for five, pay little more than \$25.

Anantara will arrange a guide to take you into town if you are up for some street food but unsure where to start. Bao shows us around and his English is good, he explains, thanks to working in a nearby hostel for a British boss. "There were no tourists here until six years ago," he explains. Many spots specialise in one thing: we opt for *banh xeo* – fried rice flour pancakes that you fill with beef, shrimp or crispy veg with the traditional dipping sauce. Anh Vu or Gia Vy are the spots of

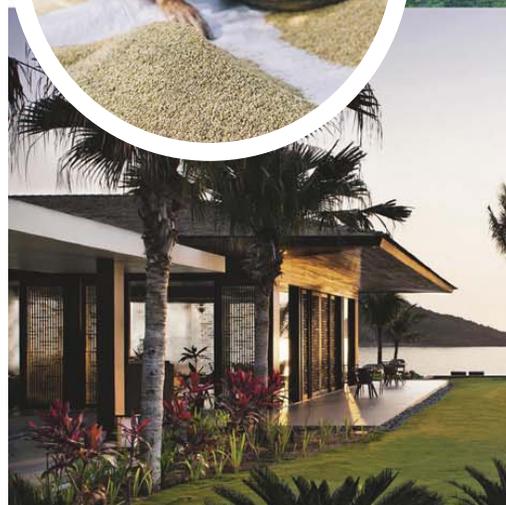
choice for locals and we happily sit on plastic chairs amongst it before finishing at Cafe Mê Trang for a caramel-y Vietnamese coffee. Since its introduction to Vietnam by the French in the 19th century, coffee is brewed over a single metal drip filter then served with sweet condensed milk poured over ice. It's addictive and a heart starter!

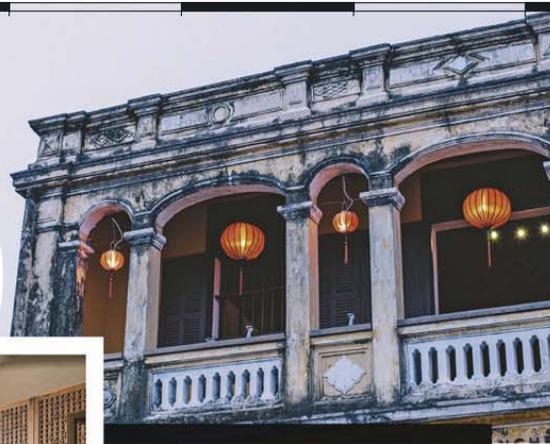
There's also an assortment of local restaurants and seafood cafes if you wander down the beach in the inlet next to the resort. We had a lovely local meal at nearby sister hotel Avani (a more affordable stay) of prawn and coconut stir-fry, 'everything' cake, fried rice and textured rice paper spring rolls.

Beachfront pool villas start at \$747 per night; anantara.com/en/quy-nhon.

GETTING THERE

Quy Nhon is a picturesque five-hour drive from Hoi An, however Anantara has its own train in development, to transport guests from Da Nang. This would make the five-hour commute from its sister resort Anantara Hoi An a breeze! There are also daily flights from Phu Cat airport direct to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.





Poolside in Quy Nhon; dining at Sea, Salt, Fire; Quy Nhon's abundant seafood offerings (inset); an ocean-view villa; golden hour at the resort.



JUST ADD: HOI AN

Hoi An, and the nearby beachside city Da Nang (where we fly into), are popular stops on many a Vietnamese tourist's trail and rightly so. Hoi An is the loveliest surprise of our trip. The UNESCO World Heritage listed old town is intriguing and beautiful; laneways to get lost in because all the buildings boast chalky yellow walls (painted to convey power) contrasting with bold fuchsia bougainvillea and lanes strung to the brim with lanterns. The heaving streets shut out motorbikes after 3pm as the city readies itself for the pedestrian-heavy night market and the river comes alive with cruises and boats lit bright with colourful lanterns. The energy is remarkable and we wander around wide-eyed with wonder.

Anantara is one of the only luxury resorts positioned on the river within walking distance of the markets and the old town, yet it's only a 10-minute shuttle or taxi ride to An Bang beach. It's a charming low-rise colonial-style resort with 94 rooms; its walls bearing witness to the changes in the city that was once Southeast Asia's trading lifeline dating back to the 16th century. The heat can be oppressive in the middle of the year, but

the off-peak season does mean less people to contend with.

The resort's personable Dutch-born executive chef Geert-Jan Vaartjes has worked in Michelin-starred restaurants and also oversees the operations in Quy Nhon. His upmarket restaurant and cocktail bar **Art Space**, a collaboration with the March Gallery, boasts the only 3D printer in Vietnam – he showed me how he creates picture-perfect chocolate replicas of the famous Japanese Bridge (known as the symbol of Hoi An, or Chua Cau) to finish desserts. His less formal offerings in the resort include a pizza joint, and a street food night on the river, which allows guests to experience classic street food like Vietnamese pizza, smoked snails or squid skewers they see in the night markets but may not be confident to eat.

Other local spots include stalwart **Ms Vy's Morning Glory** (there are three, we tried 'the original'), which is a fast, fun and a very affordable good local meal. (Vy also runs a cooking school.) **The Joi Factory** is another gem. Run by Chinese-Vietnamese chef Tru Lang, it's in the back streets of Hoi An overlooking the river. You'll pass through organic vegetable gardens to get there, and they only use local produce within a 10km radius. From the seasonal seafood curry to creme brulee with passionfruit and dragon fruit, it was a hit. Sydney chef Lennox Hastie recommends **Miss Ly** for "the best white rose dumplings" – a Hoi An speciality of steamed rice paper with a pork or shrimp mince filling that when cooked rumples like the petals of a rose. Jerry Mai suggests **Banh Mi Phuong** or **Madam Khanh** for the battle of the best banh mi in town. ✕

"[QUY NHON HAS] SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL COASTLINE IN THE COUNTRY."

