

Made to order

A centuries-old silk trading post with hundreds of tailors, Hoi An is a bespoke shopper's paradise. But visitors in search of couture are advised to avoid some common pitfalls and keep their expectations in check.

Text Arwen Joyce

▲ Clockwise from above: Hoi An's streetscape is marked by charming shops mainly catering to tourists who visit this quaint Vietnamese city for its traditional arts; The most popular souvenirs from Hoi An are its lanterns. Customers can choose their own design and watch the lantern being made in front of their eyes from brocade or silk; Hoi An's tailors might not boast of designer credentials but their stitching and eye for detail is impeccable.

They stretch before me in bright pink, yellow and white, trailing delicate silken tassels in matching hues. Strolling through Hoi An's historic old town at twilight, I quickly lose count of the brightly coloured lanterns that hang from shophouse roofs, bedeck bridges and drip from tree branches. Their light lends a romantic glow to this sleepy village in

Central Vietnam, but my travel companion, Stephanie, and I are not here for romance.

We've come in search of the only thing that might outnumber hanging lanterns in Hoi An: tailors. At last count there were well over 400. Four centuries ago, Hoi An's residents began sewing clothes for sailors drawn to Vietnam's coast by the booming silk trade. In the late 1800s, the port in the Thu Bon River silted up and the ships moved north, plunging Hoi An into a long slumber. Now it is tourists, not sailors, who fill these immaculately preserved streets and tailoring has become the town's lifeblood.

Secret weapon

Modern-day Hoi An presents both an opportunity and a challenge for visitors in

search of bespoke garments. I don't know a dart from a gusset or a pintuck from a double hem so I'm left with selecting a tailor at random or following the commission-fuelled recommendations of my hotel. Tailor quality and professionalism can vary greatly and in a market where tourists only stay for 48 hours, not much effort is put into reputation building. Luckily, I have a secret weapon up my tailored sleeve.

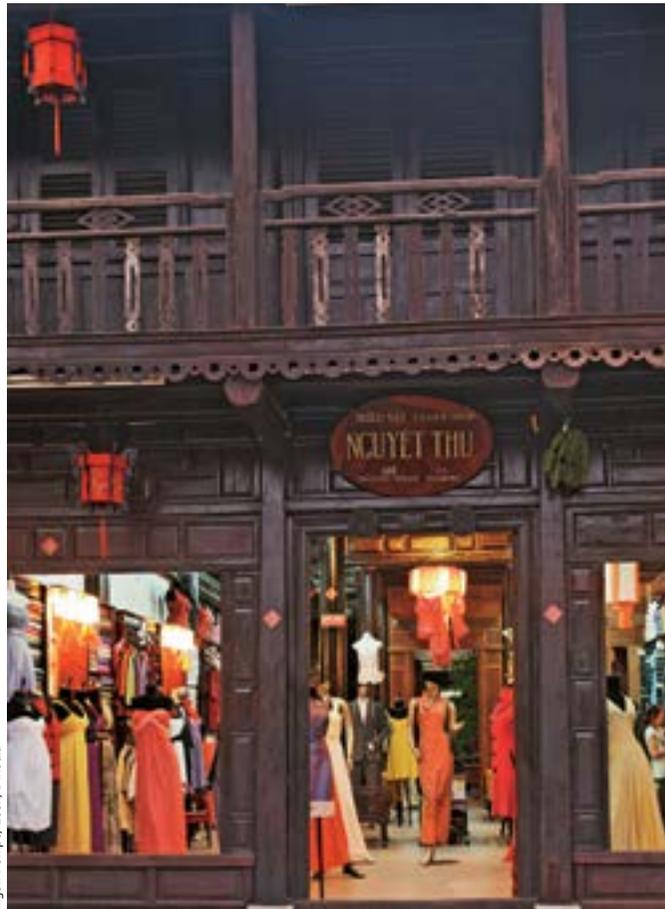
Caroline Mills of Style Hoi An buzzes up to Seedlings café on her scooter in a beach-casual white dress. Over iced Vietnamese coffees, she helps us devise a game plan. Dress designs in hand, we will visit silk shops and tailors until we find the right fabric

and the right dressmaker for the project, all at the right price. It sounds simple but the next twelve hours are a blur of stacks of patterned cloth, sketches made in order books and whirring sewing machines.

Caroline's familiarity with Hoi An's tailors and fabric warehouses was born out of necessity—there are virtually no off-the-rack clothing stores in town, unless you want your wardrobe to consist entirely of "Good Morning, Vietnam" T-shirts and fisherman trousers. When she moved here over three years ago, developing a rapport with the best tailors in town—especially the small shops you can't find on travel review websites or in guidebooks—became an obsession. Soon, she had amassed



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Ingolf Pompe/Look/Dinodia

enough knowledge to offer a tailor liaison service to English-speaking visitors.

Silk shops and tape measures

The morning passes in a haze of fabric warehouses, which are usually just bolts of material stacked floor to ceiling on the ground floor of someone's home. Finally, we find ourselves in Caroline's favourite silk shop. Mrs Hông welcomes us into her treasure trove, which is hidden behind a nondescript travel desk selling plane tickets to Hanoi and day trips to Hue. The proprietress is a bubbly grandmother in her fifties who looks at least a decade younger. Mrs Hông buys her silk supplies from Chinese distributors, as do the other fabric shops in town. The Chinese blends are inexpensive but can have an unattractive sheen and are crisp, rather than soft, to the touch.

Frustratingly, silk of the finest quality is still produced on clacking wooden looms in small villages in Quang Nam province a short drive from Hoi An but every last scrap is exported for sale to more lucrative markets. The highest-end tailors in town, such as Yaly and A Dong Silk, import good quality materials but buying it from them can quickly tear through a limited budget. Buying fabric from wholesalers like Mrs

▲ Clockwise from above: Selecting the design you like can often be like searching for a needle in a haystack; Hoi An's architectural heritage is well-preserved. The building might be hundreds of years old but the fashion it retails is always on-trend; Hoi An's tailors know how to turn bales of plain cloth into sartorial pieces of art.

Hông eliminates the tailors' fabric mark-up, but I'm beginning to see that the amount of legwork involved is substantial.

Mrs Hông jokes that the fabric I select for this dress will affect everything from whether or not I get married, to my future career prospects. I force a smile but I'm

unnerved. Half a day into my quest for the perfect bespoke dress, I am feeling the pressure. Just as all the bolts of fabric are beginning to meld into one endless morass in my mind, Caroline announces that we have found what we need. Mrs Hông nods approvingly and whips her scissors through the silk, measuring out the desired length.



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Feeling triumphant, we continue down the dusty, sun-baked street for a meeting with our dressmaker.

Measure twice, cut once

If the lesson learned from four solid hours of fabric shopping was perseverance, Caroline warns us that the next phase of the task, which involves dress fitting, will test our patience and fortitude. When we return to Minh Trang's tailor shop the next day, I am both excited and nervous to see the results of her methodical measuring

and sketching. Caroline's favourite dressmaker greets us warmly and sends Stephanie into the dressing room. Trang used to teach dress design and tailoring at a Vietnamese university. After her husband suffered a motorcycle accident, she opened a shop out of her home so that she could take care of him. Today, she has enough work to keep a stable of apprentice tailors busy. She has taught all of them to cut, stitch and draw, but she takes all the measurements and attends to her clients' fittings personally.

It is tourists who fill the immaculate streets of Hội An and tailoring is the town's lifeblood. Modern day Hội An presents both an opportunity and a challenge for visitors in search of bespoke garments.

Stephanie emerges from behind the dressing room curtain in a green and blue silk shift dress. When she catches sight of herself in the mirror, her face falls. It hangs loosely off her slim frame and Trang sets to work immediately marking the seams where it needs to be taken in. After twelve hours of fabric shopping, measuring and sketching, it is hard not to be disappointed with a half-finished garment upon which so many expectations have been built. "Don't worry," Trang says reassuringly, "all will be fixed tomorrow."

Letting go

Leaving the final fitting, we stroll through Hội An's quiet lanes at dusk one last time. Tomorrow there will only be time to

◀ Left : Caroline browses through stacks of dress material at Trang's tailor shop. Above left and right: Stephanie gets measured and fitted into a green and blue silk shift dress by Minh Trang insider her shop.



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collect our finished dresses from Trang on our way out of town. As we approach the famous Japanese bridge, music from the restaurants and bars on the opposite bank filters across through the moonlight. "Worst case scenario: even if I never wear the dress," Stephanie says pragmatically, "I had a fantastic time getting it made." It's true; being so involved in the process and having the personal attention of a trained tailor was a rare treat considering I only ever buy factory made prêt-à-porter.

A woman and her grandson are selling paper lanterns by the river. They light a candle in one and hand it to Stephanie. We both make a silent wish that the finished product we pick up tomorrow will be wearable after all the time spent on fabric shopping, design details and fittings over the past two days. We release the glowing lantern out onto the Hoai River and it drifts off into the darkness.

▲ Above: Hoi An's wooden shophouses, markets and Chinese-style assembly halls look much like they did in its eighteenth century heyday. Below: Hoa Vang is one of the many restaurants in Hoi An that caters to expatriates and tourists by offering them cold beer, Vietnamese food and cooking classes.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Hong Kong and Singapore. Direct onward flights to Da Nang, Vietnam are available. From Da Nang, Hoi An is just 30 km by road.

Accommodation

Although Hoi An has no dearth of options when it comes to staying, it is wise to book well in advance and confirm your booking just before arriving in Hoi An because finding accommodation at the last-minute is tough. Hotels, hostels, guesthouses and B&Bs are plenty.

For more information

Log on to www.hoian-tourism.com. For your own sartorial adventure, try Style Hoi An (www.stylehoian.com) which offers valuable guidance on shopping for and getting a dress stitched in Hoi An, besides tips on where to stay and eat. Also try, Tâm Hương Silk, wholesale and Retail Silk, 718A Hai Bà Trưng, Hoi An Trang Cloth Shop, 47 Tran Hug Dao, Hoi An.

