



DESTINATION

Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon, as most people still refer to it, retains vestiges of its French colonial past, but it is unmistakably a modern Asian city. We offer you tips to unravel a world of culture, world-class cuisine and buzzing nightlife over a weekend in Vietnam's largest city.

WHEN CITY LIGHTS SHINE BRIGHT

TEXT ARWEN JOYCE

Ho Chi Minh City offers plenty to do throughout the day. The city has great avenues for nightlife as well.



FRIDAY: A FEAST FOR THE EYES

Start your weekend with a stunning display of artistry and acrobatics at the AO Show. The 60-minute performance is a beautiful introduction to Vietnamese culture set to live traditional music that tracks the country's journey from a predominantly rural economy to urbanisation. The dancers show off their strength and flexibility using bamboo props in unexpected ways. The show's setting, the Saigon Opera House, is a draw on its own. Built in 1900, it is a superb example of French colonial architecture.

Next, seek out an entirely different style of dancing through a small yellow archway one block from the Opera House and across the street from the Park Hyatt hotel. A selection of restaurants and bars draws crowds to the courtyard in the evenings but the standout option for live entertainment on a Friday night is Beirut Garden. Besides relishing the fresh Lebanese fare, you can join the belly dancers for a hip-shake if you feel adventurous.

SATURDAY: GET THE LAY OF THE LAND

To orient yourself in this sprawling metropolis, ascend the Bitexco Financial Tower, which takes its unique shape from Vietnam's national flower, the lotus. The Saigon Skydeck on the

49th floor offers 360 degree panoramic views of the city, which hugs the west bank of the Saigon River and spreads out in all directions as far as the eye can see. There's a cafe on the 50th floor, where you'll also find a separate lift to whisk you up to



Above: Get a great view of the city from the Saigon Skydeck located in the Bitexco Financial Tower. You can see the Cho Ben Thanh and the Notre Dame Cathedral from here too.

Top: The Saigon Opera House is the setting for the AO Show. Visit this building for a cultural experience and fine architecture.



After a day of navigating through motorcycles, balloon sellers and pedi-cabs on the streets of Saigon, a beverage on a breezy rooftop is just what the doctor ordered.

Clockwise from above: The War Remnants Museum is a grim reminder of the horrors of war; A large marketplace, Cho Ben Thanh is a paradise for shoppers who love a good bargain; You will find a large number of sidewalk restaurants around the market area. They are famous for their fresh and authentic Vietnamese cuisine.

the helicopter-landing deck and Alto Helipad Bar on the 52nd floor, nearly 200 metres above the sidewalk.

Back on terra firma, it's a quick stroll to the oldest surviving market in the city. Built in 1870 by the French to house an informal market that had been thriving since the early 17th century, Cho Ben Thanh is a two-storey warren of stalls selling everything from food to clothes and souvenirs. Avoid the touristy knick-knacks and head straight for the food section. The displays of coffee beans, fresh and pickled fruit, dried snacks and spices will tempt you to pull out your camera, if not your wallet. Don't be afraid to shop around and haggle

for the best price. When you get hungry, grab a *banh cuon* (a thin rice flour crepe with a meat and mushroom filling) or *cha gio* (deep fried minced pork egg rolls) from one of the stalls offering fresh, made-to-order dishes.

Devote a few hours in the afternoon to the sobering but important War Remnants Museum. Three stories of exhibits inside the building illustrate the atrocities of war. Outside, large pieces of US military hardware, including tanks, a UH-1 "Huey" helicopter, and a Howitzer artillery cannon, are on display in a walled courtyard. Some of the more gruesome exhibits may be too much for more sensitive visitors.



SATURDAY NIGHT: SAIGON AFTER DARK

For a delicious dinner in a beautiful setting that will also warm your heart, look no further than Huong Lai. The restaurant, located in a narrow shophouse, offers traditional home-style Vietnamese dishes. The scent of jasmine greets diners as they enter, which is fitting as that's what the restaurant's name means in Vietnamese. After a day of navigating through motorcycles, balloon sellers and pedi-cabs on the streets of Saigon, a beverage on a breezy rooftop is just what the doctor ordered. Twenty-seven storeys up at Chill Skybar, stylishly dressed patrons mingle

around neon-lit tables, cocktails in hand. Inevitably, the siren song of Apocalypse Now, the city's most iconic dance club, will beckon. With something for everyone, this club has a techno-pumping, laser-light flashing dance floor, a pool table, multiple bars and an outdoor patio.

As the night progresses, the restaurants and bars on the one block stretch of Dong Du Street between Dong Khoi and Hai Ba Trung streets will still be buzzing, making it a good spot to hit on your way back home.

Above: The bustling street of Dong Khoi is a prominent commercial centre.

Below: Ho Chi Minh is peppered with a number of rooftop bars and clubs—a good break option from all the action below.



Tibor Bognár, Andre Lebrun/Age/Diimedia

Destination

Clockwise from right: A strong brewed coffee and condensed milk mix is poured over ice cubes and stirred to prepare the traditional Vietnamese coffee; Lam Son Square is peppered with a number of cafes, restaurants and hotels. It is also where the Saigon Opera House is located; The largest city in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City caters to the interests of all those who visit.

SUNDAY: SIPPING AND STROLLING

After a long night, perk up with breakfast and a characteristically strong and sweet iced Vietnamese coffee (*ca phe sua da*) at La Rotonde. Dark roast coffee beans are brewed into a glass of ice and condensed milk, the perfect concoction to cut through the heat after a late night. From the café's comfortable upstairs room with its high ceilings, picture windows and vintage décor, you can take in the street scenes below from a safe distance while the caffeine works its magic.

Spend what's left of your lazy Sunday strolling, shopping and grazing. Head back towards Lam Son Square to find L'usine, a favorite haunt of hip locals and expats. The design-minded boutique carries an eclectic collection of clothing for men and women and the café serves some of the city's best cupcakes. The shop on Dong Khoi occupies a former factory dating back to the 1800's and retains the



building's original metal columns. The space oozes style and embodies the nexus of global fashion and modern Vietnamese creativity.

And just like that, the weekend is over. Having only scratched the surface of Vietnam's past, both beautiful and bleak, and been awed by the spread of this growing boom town from atop skyscrapers, it is clear that one weekend is insufficient to uncover all of Saigon's delights. Cleverly, she always leaves you wanting more. ■

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Starting November 5, 2014, Jet Airways will have daily flights to Ho Chi Minh City, from Delhi and Mumbai via Bangkok.

ACCOMMODATION

The Majestic retains its colonial grandeur and some rooms offer river views (majesticsaigon.com.vn). Hotel Continental Saigon is an 1886 stalwart with heaps of historical charm. This is where Graham Greene penned *The Quiet American* (continentalsaigon.com).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.vietnamtourism.com