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Ho Chi Minh City is a place of history and enchantment; one that captivates the imagination with both tradition and elegant new trends.

The New Saigon: Ho Chi Minh City

40 apartment living



Named Saigon up until 1976, the city's wide boulevards and sidewalk cafes once inspired French colonists to call it the Paris of Asia. Those boulevards remain, as does the sense of history combined with a growing contemporary culture. With exclusive shopping venues, fine dining options, and a much less hectic pace than big city Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City - just a short flight away - is a great getaway for a weekend or long holiday.

For some of the best shopping in the country, head to the chic boutiques on Dong Khoi Street, located next to the Caravelle Hotel in the old French Quarter of District I. This is an excellent place to find fine apparel and quality handicrafts without hassle or haggling. The street is lined with delightful shops and colonial mansions now converted to haut dining venues. Also known as Silk Street, Dong Khoi has been gaining fame of late as the place to find custom tailored silk clothing in styles from traditional Vietnamese attire to suits, dresses and even men's ties. Other shops offer fine lacquer ware dining and decorative items, hand-made, one of a kind jewelry and fashion

accessories, quality reproduced paintings, and an array of ethnic gift objects unique to Vietnam.

On the other end of the shopping spectrum - and for a taste of local life - be sure to stop at the Ben Thanh Market. This enormous, indoor market, also in District I, is criss-crossed with maze-like alleys full of tiny shops. The outer ring of Ben Thanh is a good place to start, but once you are comfortable with the crowds, do take a wander inside for an amusing escapade.

For even more cultural flavor, head to Chinatown and pay a visit to another sprawling shopping haunt, the Binh Tay Market. Found near the Cholon bus station, this two-storey complex caters mostly to local Chinese, selling all sorts of cheap goods including house wares, toys, plastic bric-a-brac, and personal care items in bulk quantities. You won't find anything spectacular at Bin Thay, but the trip around Chinatown is a colorful contrast to the colonial feel of District I.

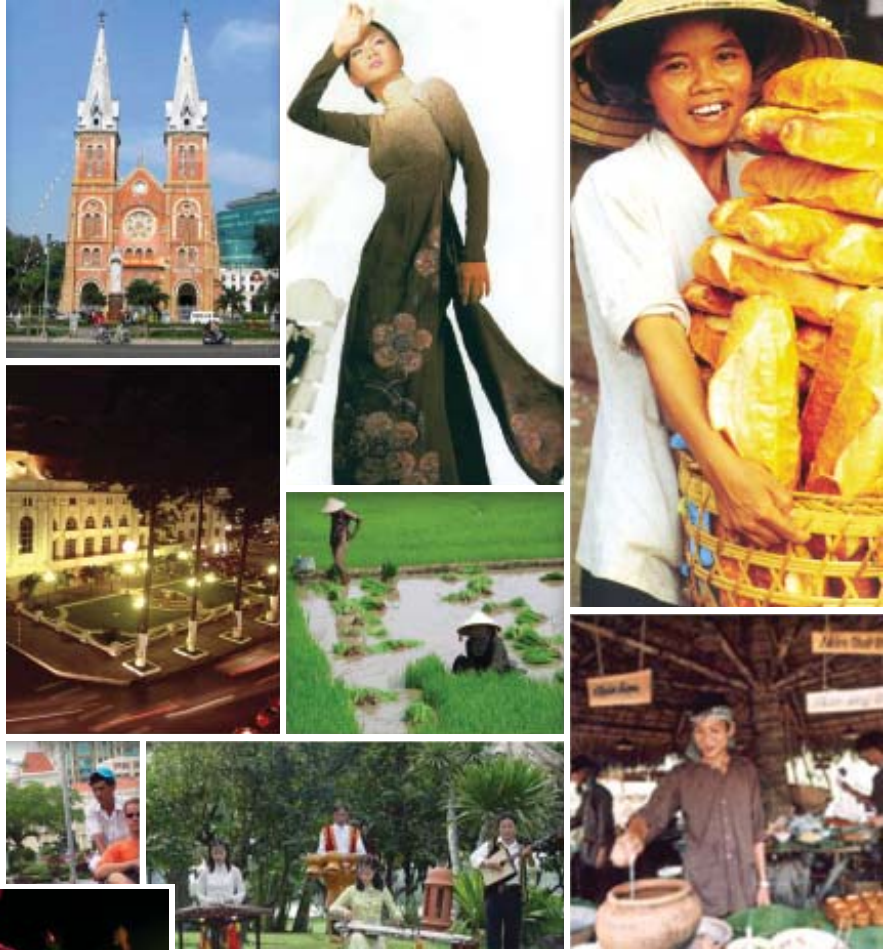
If you are seeking old atmosphere paired with cosmopolitan care, be sure to dine at The Temple Club, located on Ton That Thiep Street. This Chinese temple



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turned upscale restaurant and bar was built at the turn of the 20th century and boasts magnificent traditional architecture and fine decorative accents. High ceilings and terra cotta floors frame the exposed brick walls, while Buddhist statuary and antique rugs add flavor to the cultural mix.

The colonial-inspired dining room and old wood bar of Temple Club are a perfect match with the restaurant's authentic Vietnamese and Thai menu. Highly recommended is the *tom me*, a dish of prawns in tamarind sauce, and the Hanoi-style *cha ca*, fried monkfish. A 'western corner' also serves salads and sandwiches. For dessert try the banana coconut cream pudding, served with sesame seeds



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accompanied by real coffee or cappuccino. The Temple Club is a great place to mingle with locals and expatriates alike, but reservations are recommended.

Like no trip to Singapore is complete without a 'Singapore Sling' at the Raffles Hotel, a drink at the famous Saigon Saigon bar in The Caravelle Hotel is an absolute must. It was from this bar, during the final days of the Vietnam War, that journalists could see the front line from their bar stools - cold beers in hand. If things got lively enough, they would ride the elevator down from their tenth floor aerie to the lobby, take one of the hotel's swanky American limousines out into the field and be back in time for cocktails and note comparing. By the end of the war, journalists claimed that they could cover the action without even leaving their bar stools.

Needless to say the illustrious Caravelle forms an integral part of the Ho Chi Minh's rich historic past. The names of very few hotels evoke such fond, romantic images, and indeed such anticipation as the Caravelle. Its breezy sound recalls its inspiration: the Iberian caravels, or as the French called them, caravelles - fast, light 15th-century sailing ships that explored the world in search of foreign trade, adventure and new horizons.

Once the center of operations for the international media during the closing days of the war, the Caravelle now prides itself on offering traditional refinement in an



ambiance that is welcoming, warm and offering luxurious modern living in sophisticated and understated elegant surroundings.

1998 saw the transformation of the Caravelle from its original French architectural splendor to its current, chic luxurious counterpart. The winner of the Best Luxury Hotel Award three years running, as well as numerous other industry awards and accolades, the Caravelle is the leading five-star hotel in Ho Chi Minh City.

Managing this legendary hotel for the past five years is Stephen O'Grady, a name which may sound familiar to those living in Thailand, as he ran the Delta Grand Pacific Hotel in Bangkok for several years previous to his current posting. Having spent a considerable amount of time in both cities, O'Grady has ample room for comparison. Things he loves most about Ho Chi Minh - apart from its staple food *pho* noodles

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and French baguettes - are the broad boulevards, the beautiful, colonial architecture and the lack of street hawkers. "You can walk the sidewalk here, and the streets are very well maintained," he says, adding that "there's definitely a 'Gone with the Wind' feel to the city".

Where Bangkok is gradually losing its Asian flavor and acquiring a skyline similar to Hong Kong and Singapore, the once French colony of Ho Chi Minh City seems to be retaining its *couleur locale*. But the British born General Manager has seen many changes in the time he's been here and foresees rapid development of Vietnam in the next decade. "It's all happening very quickly here."

Not only Ho Chi Minh, but also the country's largest island Phu Quoc has a bright future ahead, predicts O'Grady. This island the size of Singapore, with its abundance of white sandy beaches and natural treasures, has infinite tourism potential and it won't be long before Phu Quoc may go on to become the next Phuket or Bali.

There is no doubt that Ho Chi Minh City is both an exciting, post-colonial destination and a rapidly developing city. While it may never see a profile the likes of some of Asia's major metropolises, it seems certain that change and expansion are

imminent. So for a taste of history combined with fine amenities, and only an hour's flight from Bangkok, there is no better time than now to pay a visit to the new Saigon.

Photographs courtesy of the Caravelle Hotel and the Temple Club.

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