

An aerial photograph of a large number of small, colorful fishing boats, primarily in shades of blue, teal, and orange, scattered across a body of greenish water. The boats vary in size and design, some with small cabins and others more open. A few people can be seen on some of the boats. The overall scene depicts a busy fishing harbor or a large-scale aquaculture operation.

#PHUQUOC #VIETNAM

Pearl of an island

Phu Quoc, dubbed the Pearl Island, is rapidly becoming the new Phuket but beyond the resorts, it's life as normal for fishermen and farmers.

By Briar Jensen



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HIS IS ISLAND-HOPPING – Phu Quoc style. Like a giant stepping on stones across a river, we leap-frog islands of the An Thoi Archipelago on the world’s longest three-rope cable car (almost eight kilometres). Beneath us the colourful local fishing fleet floats like confetti on an emerald sea so transparent I can see the mottled seabed beneath them. A speedboat etches a frothy white arc between jade-fringed islets and orange-vested snorkellers bob above rocky outcrops.



OPENING IMAGE: Local fishing fleet at An Thoi. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: One of the pristine beaches of Phu Quoc; Local boys having fun. NEXT PAGE, FROM TOP: Premier Village Phu Quoc Resort with beaches to explore; The Hon Thom Cable Car.

Phu Quoc is full of surprises. Vietnam’s largest island, it lies in the Gulf of Thailand; it’s closer to Cambodia than Vietnam; it produces fish sauce, pepper and pearls; it’s known for its beaches, yet more than 50 per cent of the island is forested national park. It’s Vietnam minus the incessant scooters of Saigon or the hubbub of Hanoi.

Pronounced ‘Foo Kwok’, it’s long been a popular holiday destination for locals. The opening of the international airport in 2012 has seen resorts develop at an astonishing pace but it still retains its fishing-village ambience ... for now.

Our sojourn starts in the south-east at Premier Village Phu Quoc Resort, located on a narrow peninsula boasting both north- and south-facing beaches. Cinching the isthmus at its narrowest point in a turquoise cummerbund is an enormous swimming pool swirling and cascading from one side of the peninsula to the other. Villas, all with private pools, perch on the rocky headland and nestle around the pool and beaches.

From here I can see the towering pylons of Hon Thom Cable Car thrusting skyward in the distance. It transports visitors to an amusement park on Hon Thom (Pineapple Island) that will eventually include a water park, aquarium and theme park.

For now, after alighting from the cable car, we’re shuttled to palm-fringed Hon Thom Beach with an inflatable floating playground, weather-worn deckchairs on the grass and rope swings over the sand. A band belts out old English pop songs from the buffet pavilion where a food station whips up an awesome pho.

Back on Phu Quoc we make an aromatic pit-stop at the Phung Hung fish sauce factory, which has been in the same family for 100 years. Made with locally caught anchovies, it takes three kilograms of fish to make one kilogram of sauce, which is brewed for one-and-a-half years and stored in gigantic timber barrels.

At Ham Ninh fishing village, stallholders in conical hats dispense a mysterious assortment of pungent, dried yellow seafood including tiny seahorses (added to wine “for men” says our guide). A concrete causeway over the water leads to a collage of timber and tin floating restaurants where diners select from a plastic tubs swimming with prawns, bugs, crabs and fish.

A visit to the Quoc An Pearl establishment includes a presentation on

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the lifecycle of an oyster. Japanese experts helped cultivate the industry here, where clear, nutrient-rich waters support many different species. Now Phu Quoc pearls are exported to Japan. A vast showroom features glass cabinets filled with pearl jewellery at every price point.

Intrigued to learn wine is made on the island, we stop for a tasting. Sim wine is produced from the rose myrtle plant. The black berries are picked from the jungle, mixed with sugar and left for a minimum of one year before the addition of rice wine. The result is more like sherry and too sweet for me, preferring the jam instead.

Keen to see more of the island, we move to Novotel Phu Quoc Resort, situated on Long Beach, which stretches almost the entire lower half of the west coast south of the main town of Duong Dong.

Dinh Cau, Duong Dong's famous seaside shrine, perches atop a jumble of rocks shaded by trees with a tenacious foothold. Although the tiny temple was built in 1937, fishermen have worshipped Thien Hau, the sea goddess, from here for thousands of years.

Judging by the town's night market, the sea goddess is generous. Restaurants are awash with seafood, from dried fish to wriggling shellfish and scuttling crustaceans.

Next day we catch a taxi to Phu Quoc Countryside where Duong Truong shows us his pepper vines trained up

rows of tall wooden poles. He fertilises the organic crop with cow manure and fish sauce waste. Black, red and white pepper all come from the same plant, the berries picked at different stages of ripeness. Picking is done by hand; drying takes five days and the berries will keep for five years.

The family keeps bees, houses a micro-brewery and grows pineapples, pomelo and passion fruit, the latter incorporated into our cooking class, mixed with ginger and chilli to accompany tuna. Jenny, who ran a restaurant in Saigon, constantly urges us to "Preeease hurry up" as we perspire over portable gas stoves, sizzling shrimp and sautéing shark, watched nonchalantly by the family dogs resting in the shade. Our dishes are delicious, if not as well-presented as Jenny's.

Sea life takes centre stage at INK 360 too, the InterContinental's rooftop bar, where giant tentacles of a mythical kraken spiral from beneath glass tabletops and protrude from the bar. Designed by Australian Ashley Sutton, it's an atmospheric location to toast the sunset with a pomelo daiquiri and observe the eerie green lights of squid boats loom in the darkness.

Our three-night visit, while too short to explore Phu Quoc's national park, has provided an insight into this UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and showcased a surprisingly different side of Vietnam. 🇻🇳



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

AirAsia flies from Sydney, Perth Melbourne and the Gold Coast to Kuala Lumpur from where it operates flights to Phu Quoc on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. [airasia.com](https://www.airasia.com)

GETTING AROUND

Most resorts offer shuttles to the local townships. Many resorts offer bicycles too. Use taxis if going further afield or hire a motorcycle. The roads are much less crowded than the mainland.

WHEN TO GO

The dry season runs from late October to early May.

WHERE TO STAY

Premier Village: Managed by Accor, it's a secluded all-villa resort on Phu Quoc's south-east corner. [premiervillage-phuquoc.com](https://www.premiervillage-phuquoc.com)
Novotel Phu Quoc: Located on the west coast's popular Long Beach. [novotelphuquoc.com](https://www.novotelphuquoc.com)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Phu Quoc Island Guide
[phuquocislandguide.com](https://www.phuquocislandguide.com)

Visit Vietnam Tourism
[vietnam.travel](https://www.vietnam.travel)



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