



Exotic mix of ancient and new

Hanoi combines its fascinating history with the bright lights of a contemporary and vibrant city, writes **Briar Jensen**

IT'S Labour Day in Hanoi and it seems most of the city's residents are celebrating around Hoan Kiem Lake. Elderly couples, young lovers, extended families and preening teens are promenading, taking photos, picnicking and relaxing by the lake and, in the case of one drunken party-goer, sleeping in the gutter by the lake.

There is a lot to celebrate as Hanoi, Vietnam's political centre, commemorates its 1000th birthday this year. As the capital of French Indochina from 1902 to 1953, Hanoi is an exotic blend of ancient Chinese, French colonial and modern European influences, its citizens embracing the future with new-found optimism and wealth.

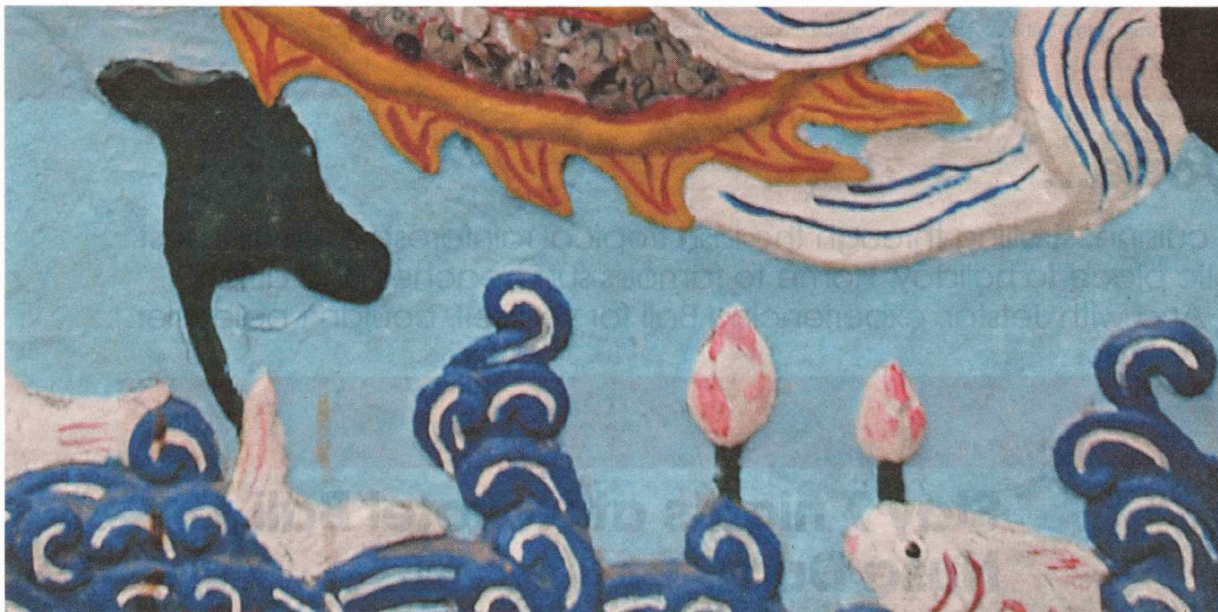
Dusty bicycles are being replaced by shiny scooters, which are literally

trees, whose foliage drips into the lake. Inside the temple, incense chokes the air as locals pay their respects at the many shrines. Ming vases sit beside plastic bonsai plants, but attracting most attention are an enormous wooden horse and a giant stuffed turtle, the latter said to have come from the lake.

Heading to the Old Quarter takes me past the Martyrs' Monument, a memorial to those killed fighting for Vietnam's independence. Today it's flanked by a flashy neon sign.

Contrasts like this are everywhere. On one street corner a department store display advertises Full HD 3D televisions, while on the opposite corner women squat on the pavement outside derelict shopfronts selling chestnuts from bamboo baskets.

In the Old Quarter, the historical



taking over the streets.

With only an afternoon to explore, I follow Lonely Planet's suggested walking tour, starting at Ngoc Son Temple on the northern end of Hoan Kiem Lake.

It's overcast and the sky hangs like a wet grey blanket over the city. But there's plenty of colour; beside the lake miniature white picket fences protect potted crimson begonias, yellow poinsettias and sunset celosia. Street sellers clutch bouquets of multi-coloured balloons so large I'm surprised they don't float away. Little girls proudly wear frothy party dresses in lollipop shades of pink and lemon.

It's almost impossible to negotiate the scarlet bridge leading to Ngoc Son Temple, as it's crowded with people having their photo taken against the lake backdrop. The temple itself, dedicated to Confucian and Taoist philosophers and a general, perches on a tiny islet surrounded by majestic

heart of the city, streets are named after the merchandise traditionally sold here. "Silk Street" and "Shoe Street" have me salivating, but not so "Coffin Street". Pavements in the narrow laneways are choked with merchandise squeezed between parked scooters.

I stumble into a food market selling everything from eggs to entrails. At a meat stall a dog's head, complete with teeth, takes me by surprise. When I try to photograph it, I'm shooved away by the feisty stall holder. I focus on a woman skinning chickens instead.

Fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs in every shade of green sprout from plastic buckets and bamboo baskets. The pungent odour of dried squid mingles with the sweet perfume of freshly cut pineapple. It's hard to pull myself away.

I'd planned to visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, but learn Uncle Ho's embalmed body is in Russia for

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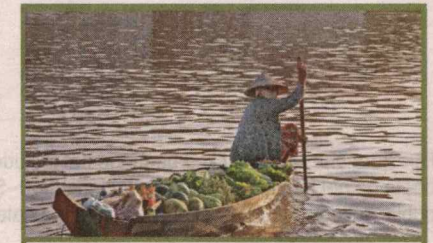
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LOADS OF COLOUR: (Clockwise from left) the entrance to Ngoc Son Temple features ornate detail; flowers are an important part of Vietnamese life; Shoe St sells nothing but footwear; and there's an enormous variety of vegetables at street stalls.

Pictures: Briar Jensen

annual maintenance. I head to the Temple of Literature instead.

Founded in 1070, the temple, dedicated to Confucius, honours Vietnamese scholars. The imposing tiered entry gate leads to a series of symmetrical walled gardens with topiary animals resting on the grass.

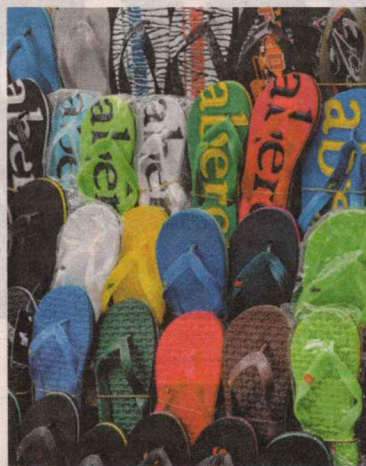
In the centre of the complex a large, square pond, the Well of Heavenly

Go2
HANOI

Getting there

Jetstar flies four times a week between Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City via Darwin, with Jetsaver Light fares available from \$349 one way.

Jetstar Pacific has multiple daily flights between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. For more information, see



Ditch jet-lag to turn into sleeping beauty

Sarah Nicholson

YOU know the feeling. It's the one you get while uncoiling yourself from an aeroplane seat after a long-haul flight. Your back aches, your neck is sore from trying to sleep sitting up, your legs are twitchy from being bent under the seat in front for hours, your skin is dry from the artificial high-altitude environment, and you yearn for something more substantial than an airline meal.

Add to that the fact your body thinks you should be wide awake, even though it's the middle of the night outside, and lack of sleep has made you feel thoroughly dopey.

It's this very sensation, this long-haul hangover, which inspired Bangkok's chic Vie Hotel to introduce the Deep Sleep program.

"Research with our hotel guests found many said similar things about minor sleeping disorders when travelling," Vie's general manager Remko Kroesen says. "A common factor was their biological clock being out of sync with their home base, having to constantly adapt to different time zones, and forcing themselves to sleep at unnatural hours adds to that weariness.

"At Vie Hotel Bangkok we understand the essence of a good night's sleep, and it is much more than just providing a choice of pillows, though we do that also."

The Deep Sleep experience started for me at the hotel's front door, where I was greeted by a sleep consultant

Go2
BANGKOK

Thai, Qantas, Singapore Airlines and several other airlines fly from Sydney to Bangkok.

The **Vie Hotel Bangkok** (www.viehotelbangkok.com) is in the heart of the city's business and shopping precincts, with the Skytrain's Ratchathewi Station almost at the front door.

The new **Bangkok Airport Train** (www.bangkokairporttrain.com), which links the city's Suvarnabhumi Airport and the centre of town, has finally begun operation and offers a good transfer alternative to Vie guests, who will need to make only one change to get from the arrivals hall to Ratchathewi Station.

blissful relaxation leading to a long, deep sleep."

As well as accommodation in one of Vie's deluxe suites – luxurious rooms featuring the finest Jim Thompson Thai silks – the Deep Sleep package includes breakfast, a selection of "relax songs" to be played in your room, a collection of pillows, and an assortment of herbal teas, aromatherapy candles and burners,

Clarity, is flanked by 82 stone stelae, each resting atop a tortoise whose head is worn smooth.

The stelae are engraved with the names of exceptional scholars, and today's young students, hoping for good luck, rub the heads of all 82 tortoises, some while chatting on their mobile phones.

Throwing caution to the wind (or the pollution-filled air), I catch a motorbike back to my hotel. It's exhilarating whizzing into the traffic, ducking and weaving with the best of them. We swerve around bicycles, taxis and a turning bus – the bumper coming within millimetres of my knee – but, strangely, I don't fear for my life. I like to think my driver knows what's he's doing, unlike the tourists trying to cross the road in front of us.

The writer travelled courtesy of Jetstar and was a guest of Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi.

www.jetstar.com or
ph 131 538.

Staying there

Escape the frenetic pace of the city at the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi, 15 Ngo Quyen St, Hanoi. The French colonial luxury is welcome respite. See www.sofitel.com

Reading there

Lonely Planet's Vietnam guidebook is a great resource, especially if you only have a short time in the city. See www.lonelyplanet.com



who helped me complete check-in formalities before escorting me to my suite and explaining the features of the room, as well as walking me through the stages of the slumber program.

The fully-trained sleep consultants, who are drawn from different departments around the hotel, ask questions about a guest's sleep patterns before explaining details of the snoozing process and suggesting a few techniques that might help get a good night's shut-eye.

"The hotel's sleep consultants will explain every detail of the sleeping process, including the healing powers of aromatherapy and the different qualities of each scent – whether it's lavender, chamomile, peppermint or juniper berries," sleep expert David Robinson says.

"When used properly, each scent can help balance and maintain physical and emotional health, as well as unwind the mind and body for

pillow mist and bath oils.

The package also includes a 45-minute relaxation treatment at Vie Spa to help relax body and soul.

I chose the foot massage, which is designed to help circulation in the legs after a flight, and a neck and shoulders massage to relieve muscle pain and stiffness, but could have had a jet-lag massage done to reduce water retention after a long-haul jaunt.

After the experience, still smelling of the calming aromatherapy oil used during the massage and feeling completely soothed, I headed to Vie Wine & Grill to enjoy a leisurely dinner at what must be one of Asia's best buffets.

I only stayed one night, arriving late and leaving early.

While I did rush through some of the Deep Sleep stages, I don't remember much after turning my light off, which means the program must have worked wonders.



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