

Historic Hoi An



BUSTLING BUSINESS: Boats crowd the banks at Hoi An on the Thu Bon River (above), offering a vital lifeline to the busy marketplace (below).

Riding a river of many returns

Life around this Vietnam river is like being in a museum, writes **Briar Jensen**

I WOULD not want to mess with these cleaver-wielding women.

Their demeanor is fierce as they hack, chop, slice and dice, transforming carcasses into cuts with raw expertise – though I notice the odd missing fingertip.

Nothing is wasted and beside the cuts of meat, displayed on cardboard off-cuts or plastic trays, are hearts, kidneys, lungs and other offal I do not immediately recognise, as well as complete backbones including tails.

Down at the dock, where bamboo baskets of fresh fish are unloaded from river junks, squatting women use the points of the same enormous cleavers to clean fish no bigger than my thumb, while nearby, prawns attempt to escape by jumping from plastic bowls.

Out on the street, hobbled ducks honk on the pavement next to their inert, plucked mates. Nearby, live chickens are for sale beside stacks of speckled eggs.

There is no better place than the local market for getting to know a city and the riverfront market in Hoi An is a beauty. I'm staying at the Life Heritage Resort, right on the edge of town, which means I can get a market fix several times a day.

Hoi An sits on the banks of the Thu Bon River, 30km south of Danang, on Vietnam's central east coast.

It was a major international trading centre in the 16th and 17th centuries and attracted Japanese, Chinese, Dutch and Portuguese traders whose architectural legacy remains in the narrow streets of the Old Quarter.

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, the old town remains a vibrant, crowded marketplace, described as "a living



museum" in the local tourist brochure. That is true.

Old and new Vietnam converge in a hypnotic display of colour, sound and movement.

River fishermen chat on mobile phones while throwing nets just as their forefathers did.

Wrinkled, toothless grandmothers, perching on junks, thrust out their hands expectantly after a photo opportunity. In the marketplace locals weave between street stalls on ancient rusty bicycles and glossy new motor scooters, stopping to buy provisions.

Thankfully, the streets of the Old Quarter are closed to motorised traffic. That makes them slightly less chaotic than elsewhere in Vietnam.

Crossing the road still is a daunting prospect, though I learn to bluff my way through the cyclos and bicycles, while dodging ankle-busting potholes.

Here colonial-era terrace houses line the streets, their colourfully painted, weathered exteriors draped with ugly black electricity cables and rampant bougainvilleas.

Beyond the shopfronts are family homes, offering fleeting glimpses into the private lives of tailors, lantern-makers, cobblers and trinket traders.

At night, the town takes on a magical glow as hundreds of coloured lanterns dangle from bridges, awnings and windows.

Lantern shops attract tourists like moths to a flame with their rainbow-coloured silk creations.

The tailors here are famous for whipping up suits or copying garments in a matter of hours (at 10pm I'm assured a silk jacket that has caught my eye could be made to measure before I leave at 10 next morning).

But I am not here for the clothes

(though I succumb to the jacket that, serendipitously, fits perfectly).

The history and atmosphere are what attract me, like the ornate Japanese bridge, the Cantonese Assembly Hall with its intricate dragon statues, and the elaborately gated Phuc Kien Assembly Hall.

When the heat gets too much I head back to the Life Heritage Resort and relax on my porch daybed, watching junks ply the river.

While the exterior of the resort channels French-colonial, the interior of my spacious split-level room is tastefully contemporary. I wish I had more time to relax here.

The lure of the river is too much, so I jump at the chance to take a cruise on the Thu Bon in the hotel's own blue-and-white lifeboat.

Our motion creates the illusion of a cooling breeze as we glide past

Wish you were here

Getting there

Jetstar flies four times a week between Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City via Darwin, with JetSaver Light fares from \$359 one-way. Connections are available from other capital cities. Then Jetstar Pacific flies on to Danang (the closest airport to Hoi An) four times a day from VND 615,000 (about \$A40).

For more information, see www.jetstar.com or telephone 131 538.

Staying there

Life Heritage Resort Hoi An, 1 Pham Hong Thai Street, is a tranquil colonial oasis beside the Thu Bon River. You can walk or cycle to the Old Quarter.

See www.life-resorts.com

enormous fishing nets and riverside construction workers toiling away in the heat.

Seen from the river, the town dock is a hive of activity under a patchwork of orange and blue tarpaulins.

Further along, aqua-coloured sight-seeing boats beckon tourists, while, on the opposite bank, mustard-yellow French-colonial houses look slightly Californian behind enormous palms.

At the resort I grab a bike and cycle along the riverfront away from town.

I'm told the quiet cycleway heads past rice paddies all the way to Cua Dai Beach. I do not have time to go that far, but enjoy watching animated locals dining at cheap, open-air restaurants and river traders in boats piled high with produce. It's easy to get among the action in Hoi An.

The writer travelled courtesy of Jetstar.