

EVERY MOUTHFUL IS AN ADVENTURE ON
A GASTRONOMIC JOURNEY THROUGH
THE STREETS OF HANOI.

GO WITH THE PHO

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL ALLEN

Banh mi nong gion nao! Crispy hot bread for sale!" On street corners across Hanoi's Old Quarter, female baguette sellers in conical hats announce their freshly baked wares each morning. Schoolgirls on bicycles, businessmen in smart sedans, housewives on mopeds – the list of customers pulling up beside their mobile bread stalls is as diverse as it is devoted.

Banh mi (pronounced "bun mee") harks back to France's colonial presence in Vietnam. Local vendors soon put their stamp on the popular Gallic staple – the kind you can pick up in any Parisian boulangerie – many cramming the imported baguette with local delicacies: barbecued pork, lemongrass chicken, crushed meatballs and tofu. In Hanoi, despite the recent proliferation of coffee shops and fast food joints, a filled banh mi remains the breakfast of choice for many residents, not to mention every backpacker in town.

CURB-SIDE GASTRONOMY

"I think what surprises many first-time visitors to Hanoi is that you won't find banh mi for sale in any of the city's chic new bakeries and cafes," says Australian expat and Vietnamese street food tour guide **Mark**

Lowerson. "These baguettes have to be purchased from stalls on the street, in alleyways, at bus terminals – many kept warm by coal braziers or inside covered bamboo baskets."

The fact that banh mi are strictly street food isn't actually all that surprising. Throughout the Vietnamese capital – perhaps more so than in any other Asian metropolis – there has always been a connection between the street and great cuisine. The city, which recently celebrated its one thousandth birthday, has certainly put those ten centuries to good use perfecting its curbside gastronomy.

"Today the Vietnamese capital is a street eater's paradise, with a smorgasbord of options for those who want to eat like a local," says **Nguyen Thanh Van**, executive sous chef at Hanoi's Sofitel Metropole Hotel. "In fact, many swear that the best food in Hanoi is sold on the sidewalk."

KITCHEN CITY

"In Hanoi, street food is not merely a quaint or exotic culinary excursion," adds Lowerson. "It lies at the heart of a rich culinary tradition, a tradition that has shaped the culture and daily rhythm of the city."

While street vendors in Hanoi often cook in small shop fronts, they serve their culinary creations on the sidewalk, as clientele seated on flimsy plastic stools





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congregate around low tables. It is here that you will find huge numbers of Hanoians happily grazing throughout the day, oblivious to the constant flow of mopeds and cyclos that characterises Hanoi traffic.

“Street food here isn’t only about enjoying cheap, tasty cuisine,” says **Nguyen My Giang Huong**, owner of highly rated Hanoi restaurant Green Tangerine. “Touring this city is a bit like walking around a big communal kitchen. Friends, families and colleagues all meet to eat on the street. Many foreign visitors here make friends simply by asking neighbours to pass chopsticks or chili sauce.”

MUST-TRY DISH LIST

With its long history of street cuisine, Hanoi is the birthplace of many quintessential Vietnamese dishes. Among the most famous is *pho*, a fragrant rice noodle soup served with fresh herbs and tender slices of meat. The *pho* in Hanoi is almost universally outstanding. Two variations are most popular: *pho ga* (with chicken) and *pho bo* (with beef). *Pho* is traditionally served as a breakfast food, with sellers setting up shop in the early hours, although many restaurants offer this delicious Vietnamese staple throughout the day.

“The best varieties of *pho* are beautifully aromatic, with crisp shallots and ginger, cinnamon and star anise, hot chilies, lime juice and *nuoc mam* (fermented fish sauce),” explains Hanoi-based food blogger **Quan Nguyen**. “It’s the subtle contrast in seasoning that makes this simple soup so appealing. For some of Hanoi’s best *pho*, check out Pho Gia Truyen on Bat Dan in the Old Quarter.”

While *pho* is probably the first food everyone thinks of when they come to Hanoi, *bun cha* is a northern speciality that should be on every visitor’s must-try menu.

“*Bun cha* consists of barbecued pork patties and slices, served in a light dipping broth, with rice noodles and various green vegetables and herbs on the side,” explains Nguyen Thanh Van.

“With all these different elements going on simultaneously, it takes a few mouthfuls to enjoy the full *bun cha* experience. The broth is flavoured by pork bone, fish sauce, soy sauce, vinegar and lime, while kohlrabi, herbs, chili and garlic lend crunch, zest and heat. Check out Bun Cha Nem Cua Be Dac Kim Restaurant on Duong Thanh Street for some of Hanoi’s finest *bun cha*, or 43 Cau Go.”



CLASS ACT

A GROWING RANGE of Hanoi-based cooking classes now offer visitors a chance to learn about Vietnamese cuisine, and to try their hand at recreating a few delicious local staples.

HIDDEN HANOI

Hidden Hanoi offers the best introduction to culinary culture in the Vietnamese capital. All cooking classes are fully hands-on. Would-be chefs have the chance to prepare their own typical Vietnamese meal in a purpose-built kitchen before sitting down to enjoy it with other students. Market and street food tours are also offered.

HIDDENHANOI.COM.VN

SOFITEL METROPOLE

As well as serving up top quality haute cuisine at its Le Beaulieu (French) and Spices Garden (Vietnamese) restaurants, the Sofitel Metropole also offers an interesting cookery class. Accompanied by a chef from the hotel, participants visit a local market before returning to the Metropole kitchen for instruction.

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MARKET MAZE

Vietnamese cuisine demands fresh ingredients, which makes Hanoi a veritable warren of assorted food bazaars, some permanent, others impromptu. Despite a growing number of supermarkets, most shopping is still conducted at local wet markets and neighbourhood shops.

“The most important thing about Vietnamese cooking is that all ingredients are bought daily,” says **Tran Hanh An**, co-founder of perennially popular cooking class and foodie tour outfit Hidden Hanoi. Most Vietnamese people will go to the market at least once a day, even if it means getting up early or stopping on the way home from work.

“The refrigerator doesn’t play an important role in cooking here,” she continues. “When my parents bought their first fridge they put it in our lounge to show how wealthy we were. In the winter we ended up switching it off because there was nothing in it.”

EAT STREETS BY NIGHT

With its cornucopia of seafood, meat, vegetables, spices and snacks, the daily Chau Long market – at the junction of Long and Nguyen Truong To – is a must visit. A totally authentic Hanoi bazaar, the whole

place seems to be held together by lids from polystyrene boxes, tarpaulins, plastic bags and extension cords. It’s dark, it’s odorous, and it’s totally fascinating.

Hanoi’s night market (Dong Xuan), held every weekend, is also a good place to sample street food. The brightly-lit food zone is the most animated, serving late night guests until early morning, and offering dishes such as hotpot, grilled meat, glutinous rice, and steaming plates of *pho cuon* (beef wrapped in long wispy strips of rice vermicelli, served with aromatic herbs and spicy sweet-sour fish sauce).

The food available on Hanoi’s narrow streets and leafy boulevards is just as much a part of the city as its lakes and old-world architecture. There’s a saying in Vietnam that while southerly Ho Chi Minh City is the belly of the country, Hanoi is the head. After sampling its gastronomic delights, some might argue that the capital has cornered the market in both politics and cuisine. ●

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FINNAIR OFFERS daily connections to Hanoi via its Asian gateways and non-stop service three times weekly from June 2.