

Central Vietnam



Home to historical sites, fantastic food and the country's most iconic beach, central Vietnam deserves to rate as a top priority for travellers. Tourists wanting to avoid lengthy bus journeys will find Danang's airport the perfect gateway to a fascinating set of the country's most famous destinations, including three must-see Unesco World Heritage sites – history-seeped Imperial Hué, architecturally impressive Hoi An and the sacred ruins of ancient My Son.

The north of the region continues to attract its share of former servicemen revisiting the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), the old border between North and South Vietnam, which saw some of the fiercest fighting of the American War. Other GIs have returned permanently to join the ex-pat community in bustling Danang. It's not just veterans that find these locales fascinating – the war's impact on popular culture also attracts legions of younger tourists.

There are plenty of relatively undiscovered spots deserving of exploration, including the beautiful cool heights of Bach Ma National Park and Ba Na Hill Station, and, surprisingly, large tracts of tele-famous China Beach. Other spots, such as the Marble Mountains and Hai Van Pass, are choked with hawkers but still make fascinating stops.

The range of accommodation on offer is extraordinary – from great-value budget places to some of the most luxurious resorts in the country. Hoi An is a shopper's paradise and, along with Hué, a great location for foodies.

Do the maths: it all adds up to make this region a *must* on any trip through Vietnam.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Eat your way around the local specialities in the beautiful buildings and historic streets of **Hoi An** (p239)
- Get imperious, making yourself at home in the Forbidden Purple City in **Hué** (p209)
- Chill out above the clouds in beautiful **Ba Na Hill Station** (p228)
- Savour the atmosphere of the holy places of the Cham people at **My Son** (p262)
- Cruise on the back of a bike along the 30km white sand stretch of **China Beach** (p237)



■ ELEVATION: 1-1865M

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: FEB-SEP



History

History hangs heavily over the central Vietnam region, and the Vietnamese are only one element of the successive stories that have unfolded here. This region was the heartland of the ancient kingdom of Champa (see the boxed text, p264), and the Chams left their mark in the shape of the many towers dotting the landscape, the most renowned of which are at My Son.

As the Vietnamese pushed southwards, pacifying the Chams, the first Europeans set foot in Vietnam: Portuguese traders, who arrived in Danang in the 16th century.

The French would come to dominate Vietnam, but not before the balance of power shifted decisively to central Vietnam under

the last royal dynasty, the Nguyens, who ruled from 1802 to 1945. Successive emperors established a lavish imperial court at Hué, which became the centre of political intrigue, intellectual excellence and spiritual guidance in Vietnam. The French broke the will of later emperors and the balance of power shifted back to Hanoi by the time of independence.

History was not to ignore this once-proud region, but this time it was a tale of tragedy. As Vietnam found itself engulfed in the American War, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting. The North Vietnamese sought to infiltrate the south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while American forces and their South Vietnamese allies tried their best to disrupt supplies.

Thousands of lives were lost in bloody battles for strategic hills and valleys, and names like Khe Sanh and Hamburger Hill were forever etched into the consciousness of the West.

Getting There & Away

Both Hué and Danang have airports, the latter linked to many major cities. The major north-south rail route cuts straight through the region, as does Hwy 1A.

DEMILITARISED ZONE (DMZ)

The Vietnam War (as the West knows it) shaped the culture of a whole generation throughout much of the world. The incredible output of films, TV shows and music relating to the war is testimony to that. While it may seem a little ghoulish, it's understandable that many tourists want to visit the names engraved in their consciousness – and not just the steady stream of Vets revisiting the places that changed their lives.

From 1954 to 1975 the Ben Hai River served as the demarcation line between the Republic of Vietnam (RVN; South Vietnam) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

(DRV; North Vietnam). On either side of the river was an area 5km wide that was known as the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). Ironically, as the conflict escalated, it became one of the most militarised zones in the world.

History

The idea of partitioning Vietnam had its origins in a series of agreements concluded between the USA, UK and the USSR at the Potsdam Conference, held in Berlin in July 1945. For logistical and political reasons, the Allies decided that the Japanese occupation forces to the south of the 16th Parallel would surrender to the British while those to the north would surrender to the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Chinese army led by Chiang Kaishek. This was despite the Viet Minh being in control of the country by September that year – Vietnam's first real taste of independence since 1887.

In April 1954 at Geneva, Ho Chi Minh's government and the French agreed to an armistice; among the provisions was the creation of a demilitarised zone at the Ben Hai River. The agreement stated explicitly that the division of Vietnam into two zones was merely

WARNING

The war may be over, but death and injury still come easy in the old DMZ. At many of the places listed in this section there may be live mortar rounds, artillery projectiles and mines strewn about. Watch where you step and don't leave the marked paths. As tempted as you might be to collect souvenirs, *never* touch any left-over ordnance. If the locals have not carted it off for scrap it means that even they are afraid to disturb it. White phosphorus shells – whose contents burn fiercely when exposed to air – are remarkably impervious to the effects of prolonged exposure and are likely to remain extremely dangerous for many more years.

It's not just the DMZ that's affected. It's estimated that as much as 20% of Vietnam remains uncleared, with more than three million mines and 350,000 to 800,000 tonnes of unexploded ordnance (UXO). This represents a staggering 46 tonnes of UXO per sq km or 280kg per person. Between 1975 and 2000 it resulted in the deaths of 38,849 people and 65,852 injuries nationwide. Around 1200 to 3000 people are injured every year.

The People's Army is responsible for most ongoing mine clearance, but they're joined by a number of foreign NGOs. One of the most active is the **Mines Advisory Group** (www.mag.org.uk). Details on how to donate to the cause are available on its website.

temporary and that the demarcation line did not constitute a political boundary. But when nationwide general elections planned for July 1956 were cancelled by the South who predicted a Viet Minh win, Vietnam found itself divided into two states with the Ben Hai River, which is almost exactly at the 17th Parallel, as their de facto border.

During the American War, the area just south of the DMZ was the scene of some of the bloodiest battles of the conflict. Quang Tri, The Rockpile, Khe Sanh, Lang Vay and Hamburger Hill became household names in the USA as, year after year, TV pictures and casualty figures provided Americans with their evening dose of war.

Since 1975, 5000 people have been injured or killed in and around the DMZ by mines and ordnance left over from the war. Despite the risk, impoverished peasants still dig for chunks of leftover metal to sell as scrap, for which they are paid a pittance.

Orientation

The old DMZ extends from the coast westward to the Lao border; Hwy 9 runs basically parallel to the DMZ, about 10km south, and passes beside several US bases.

The road leading southeast from the Dakrong Bridge on Hwy 9 goes to Aluoi and the Ashau Valley (site of the infamous Hamburger Hill).

Information

For an in-depth tour of the DMZ, it is best to link up with a good guide, both to fully appre-

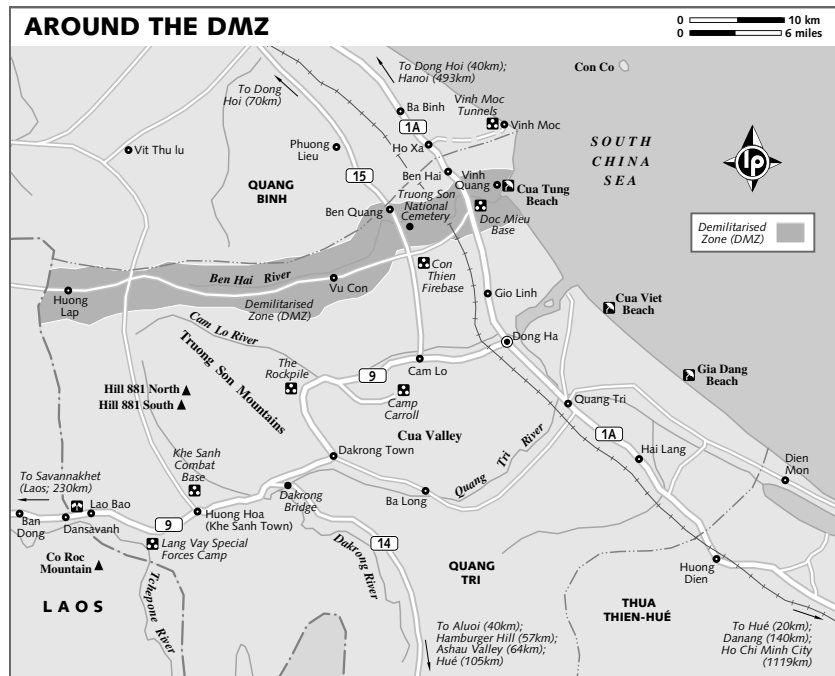
ciate the history and, critically, to physically find some of the sites. Many are unmarked, and it's easy to get lost in the labyrinth of dirt tracks.

Day tours are most readily available in Hué and Dong Ha. Bookings can be made at almost any hotel or café in either town. There are only a few agencies running the tours, so no matter where you sign up you'll probably wind up as part of a group. Expect to pay around US\$8 to US\$15 for a day-long outing. Most of these tours have English-speaking guides, but some speak French. The main complaint about these bus tours is that they are extremely long and, as they cover quite a distance, there's more time spent driving than sightseeing. A car and guide from Hué may set you back around US\$65.

In Dong Ha you can't move for motorcyclists offering tours on the back of their bikes. Many of the older guys speak excellent English as they once worked for the American military or fought alongside them. Unfortunately the one-time defenders of capitalism also demand extortionate fees – US\$15 is fair for a day's tour.

Military Sites off Highway 1A VINH MOC TUNNELS

The incredible tunnels of **Vinh Moc** (admission 15,000d; ☎ 7am-4.30pm) are a monument to the perseverance of the North Vietnamese. The 2.8km of tunnels, all of which can be visited, are the real thing and unadulterated for viewing by tourists, unlike the tunnels at Cu Chi (p378). Vinh Moc's underground passageways



are larger and taller than those at Cu Chi, which makes for an easier and slightly less claustrophobic visit. There are lights installed inside the tunnels, but you may also want to bring a torch (flashlight). There's an interesting museum on site, housing photos and relics of tunnel life. Outside, American bomb casings are dotted around everywhere, as are the craters that they created.

A visit to the tunnels can be combined with bathing at the beaches that extend for many kilometres to the north and south.

The turn-off to Vinh Moc from Hwy 1A is 6.5km north of the Ben Hai River in the village of Ho Xa. Follow this road east for 13km.

CUA TUNG BEACH

This long, secluded stretch of sand, where Vietnam's last emperor, Bao Dai, used to holiday, is just north of the mouth of the Ben Hai. There are beaches on the southern side of the Ben Hai River as well. Every bit of land in the area not levelled for planting is pockmarked with big bomb craters.

There are no buses to Cua Tung Beach, which can be reached by turning east off Hwy 1A at a point 1.2km north of the Ben Hai River. Cua Tung Beach is about 7km south

of Vinh Moc via the dirt road that runs along the coast.

DOC MIEU BASE

Doc Mieu Base, next to Hwy 1A on a low slope 8km south of the Ben Hai River, was once part of an elaborate electronic system (McNamara's Wall, named after the US Secretary of Defense between 1961 and 1968) intended to prevent infiltration across the DMZ. Today it is a lunar landscape of bunkers, craters, shrapnel and live mortar rounds. Bits of cloth and decaying military boots are strewn about on the red earth. This devastation was created not only by the bombs, but also by scrap-metal hunters, who found excavations at this site particularly rewarding.

BEN HAI RIVER

Twenty-two kilometres north of Dong Ha, Hwy 1A crosses the Ben Hai River, once the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam. Check out the old wartime bridge – until 1967, when it was bombed by the Americans, the northern half of the bridge that stood on this site was painted red, while the southern half was yellow. Following the signing of the Paris cease-fire agreements

in 1973, the present bridge and the two flag towers were built.

TRUONG SON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Truong Son National Cemetery is a sobering memorial to the tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers who were killed in the Truong Son Mountain Range along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Row after row of white tombstones stretch across the hillsides. The cemetery is maintained by disabled war veterans.

The soldiers are buried in five zones according to the part of Vietnam they came from, and each zone is further subdivided into provinces. The gravestones of five colonels and seven decorated heroes, including one woman, are in a separate area. Each headstone bears the inscription 'Liet Si', which means martyr. The remains of soldiers interred here were originally buried near the spot where they were killed and were brought here after reunification. Many graves are empty, simply bearing the names of a small number of Vietnam's 300,000 MIAs.

The site where the cemetery now stands was used as a base by the May 1959 Army Corps from 1972 to 1975. Named after the date on which they were founded, they had the mission of constructing and maintaining a supply line to the South – the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail. On the hilltop above the sculpture garden is a three-sided stele with inscriptions paying tribute to this corps and outlining their history.

The road to Truong Son National Cemetery intersects Hwy 1A 13km north of Dong Ha and 9km south of the Ben Hai River; the distance from the highway to the cemetery is 17km.

A rocky path that is passable by motorbike links Cam Lo (on Hwy 9) with Truong Son National Cemetery (18km). This track passes rubber plantations and also the homes of Bru (Van Kieu) people, who cultivate, among many other crops, black pepper.

CON THIEN FIREBASE

In September 1967 North Vietnamese forces, backed by long-range artillery and rockets, crossed the DMZ and besieged the US Marine Corps base of Con Thien, which was established as part of McNamara's Wall in an attempt to stop infiltrations across the DMZ.

The USA responded with 4000 bombing sorties (including 800 by B-52s), during

which more than 40,000 tonnes of bombs were dropped on the North Vietnamese forces around Con Thien, transforming the gently sloping brush-covered hills into a smoking moonscape of craters and ash. The siege was lifted, but the battle had accomplished its real purpose: to divert US attention from South Vietnam's cities in preparation for the Tet Offensive. The area around the base is still considered too dangerous, even for scrap-metal hunters, to approach.

Con Thien Firebase is 10km west of Hwy 1A and 7km south of Truong Son National Cemetery along the road that links the highway with the cemetery. Concrete bunkers mark the spot a few hundred metres to the south of the road where the base once stood.

Military Sites on Highway 9

The legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail – the main artery of supplies for the North's war effort – was not one path but many, leading through the jungles of the country's mountainous western spine. In an effort to cut the line near the border, the Americans established a series of bases along Hwy 9, including (from west to east) Lang Vay, Khe Sanh, Ca Lu (now called Dakrong Town), The Rockpile, Camp Carroll, Cam Lo, Dong Ha, Gio Linh and Cua Viet. Ultimately their efforts were unsuccessful.

LANG VAY SPECIAL FORCES CAMP

In February 1968 Lang Vay Special Forces Camp was attacked and overrun by North Vietnamese infantry backed by nine tanks. Ten of the 24 Americans at the base were killed, along with 316 South Vietnamese, Bru and Montagnard (term meaning highlanders, used to refer to the ethnic minorities) defenders. All that's left of the dog bone-shaped camp are the overgrown remains of numerous concrete bunkers, and a rusty tank memorial.

The base is on a ridge southwest of Hwy 9, between Khe Sanh bus station (9.2km) and Lao Bao (7.3km).

HUONG HOA (KHE SANH TOWN)

This town has now been officially renamed Huong Hoa, but the Western world remembers it as Khe Sanh. Set amid beautiful hills, valleys and fields at an elevation of about 600m, it is a verdant district capital. The town is known for its coffee plantations, which were originally cultivated by the French.

GOING UNDERGROUND

In 1966 the USA began a massive aerial and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam. Just north of the DMZ, the villagers of Vinh Moc found themselves living in one of the most heavily bombed and shelled strips of land on the planet. Small family shelters could not withstand this onslaught and villagers either fled or began tunnelling by hand into the red-clay earth.

The Viet Cong (VC) found it useful to have a base here and encouraged the villagers to stay. After 18 months of work, during which the excavated earth was camouflaged to prevent its detection from the air, an enormous complex was established underground. Civilians were employed in the digging and were accommodated in new underground homes. Whole families lived here and 17 babies were born in the underground delivery room. Later, the civilians and VC were joined by North Vietnamese soldiers, whose mission was to keep communications and supply lines to nearby Con Co Island open.

Other villages north of the DMZ also built tunnel systems, but none was as elaborate as Vinh Moc. The poorly constructed tunnels of Vinh Quang village (at the mouth of the Ben Hai River) collapsed after repeated bombing, killing everyone inside.

The tunnel network at Vinh Moc remains essentially as it looked in 1966, though some of the 12 entrances – seven of which open onto the palm-lined beach – have been retimbered and others have become overgrown. The tunnels were built on three levels ranging from 12m to 23m below the crest of the bluff.

US warships stationed off the coast consistently bombarded the tunnels, but the only ordnance that posed a real threat was the feared 'drilling bomb'. Only once did such a bomb score a direct hit, but it failed to explode and no-one was injured; the inhabitants adapted the bomb hole for use as an air shaft. Occasionally the mouths of the tunnel complex that faced the sea were struck by naval gunfire.

Many of the inhabitants are of the Bru tribe who moved here from the surrounding hills. You'll notice their different clothing, with women wearing sarong-like skirts, and woven baskets taking the place of plastic bags.

About the only reason for staying here is if you're planning to hit the road to Laos the next morning. The **Huong Hoa (Khe Sanh) Guest-house** (☎ 053-880 740; 64 Khe Sanh; r 120,000d; 🚻) offers private bathrooms and hot water.

The bus station is on Hwy 9, about 600m towards the Lao frontier from the triangular intersection where the road to Khe Sanh Combat Base branches off. Buses to Dong Ha (15,000d, 1½ hours) and Lao Bao (10,000d, one hour) depart regularly. Change at Dong Ha for all other destinations.

KHE SANH COMBAT BASE

The site of the most famous siege – and one of the most controversial battles – of the American War, **Khe Sanh Combat Base** (admission 30,000d; 🕒 7am–4.30pm) sits silently on a barren plateau, surrounded by vegetation-covered hills that are often obscured by mist and fog. It is hard to imagine as you stand in this peaceful, verdant land that in early 1968 the bloodiest battle of the war took place here. About 500 Americans (the official figure of 205 was arrived at by statistical sleight of hand), 10,000 North Vietnamese troops and uncounted civilian bystanders died amid the din of machine guns and the fiery explosions of 1000kg bombs, white-phosphorus shells, napalm, mortars and artillery rounds of all sorts.

The site includes the recent addition of a small memorial museum. A couple of bunkers have been recreated and some photos and other memorabilia are on show. Behind the main site, the outline of the airfield remains distinct – to this day nothing will grow on it. Some of the comments in the visitors' book, especially those written by visiting war veterans, can make for emotional reading.

A MIA team still visits the area regularly to search for the bodies of Americans who disappeared during the fierce battles in the surrounding hills. Most remains they find are Vietnamese.

Getting There & Away

To get to Khe Sanh Combat Base from Huong Hoa bus station, head 600m towards Dong Ha then turn northwest at the triangular intersection; there's a small sign. The base is 2.5km

further, 500m off the right-hand (east) side of the road.

DAKTRONG BRIDGE

Crossing the Dakrong River 13km east of the Khe Sanh bus station, Dakrong Bridge was rebuilt in 2001. The road to Aluoi that heads southeast from the bridge passes by the stilted homes of the Bru people and was once a branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

ALUOI

On Hwy 14 – a route synonymous with the Ho Chi Minh Trail – is Aluoi, approximately 65km southeast of Dakrong Bridge and 60km southwest of Hué. There are several waterfalls and cascades in the surrounding area. Tribes living in this mountainous area include the Ba Co, Ba Hy, Ca Tu and Taoi. US Army Special Forces bases in Aluoi and Ashau were overrun and abandoned in 1966; the area then became an important centre for supplies coming down the Trail.

Among the better-known military sites around Aluoi are **landing zones Cunningham, Erskine and Razor**, as well as **Hill 1175** (west of the valley) and **Hill 521** (in Laos). Further south, in the Ashau Valley, is **Hamburger Hill** (Apbia Mountain). In May 1969 US forces on a search-and-destroy operation near the Lao border fought in one of the fiercest battles of the war. In less than a week of fighting, 241 US soldiers died at Hamburger Hill – a fact that was very well publicised in the US media. A month later, after the US forces withdrew from the area to continue operations elsewhere, the hill was reoccupied by the North Vietnamese Army.

THE ROCKPILE

Back on Hwy 9, this 230m-high pile of rocks once had a US Marine Corps lookout on top and a base for American long-range artillery nearby.

Today there isn't much left of The Rockpile and you will probably need a guide to point it out to you. It's 26km west of Dong Ha on Hwy 9.

CAMP CARROLL

Established in 1966, Camp Carroll was named after a Marine Corps captain who was killed while trying to seize a nearby ridge. The gargantuan 175m cannons at Camp Carroll were used to shell targets as far away as Khe Sanh.

THE FIGHT FOR NOWHERE

Despite opposition from marine corps brass, the small US Army Special Forces (Green Beret) base at Khe Sanh, built to recruit and train local Montagnards, was turned into a marines' stronghold in late 1966. In April 1967 there began a series of 'hill fights' between US forces and the well-dug-in North Vietnamese infantry, who held the hills 8km to the northwest. In only a few weeks, 155 marines and thousands of North Vietnamese were killed.

In late 1967 American intelligence detected the movement into the hills around Khe Sanh of tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars, armed with mortars, rockets and artillery. General Westmoreland became convinced that the North Vietnamese were planning another Dien Bien Phu (the decisive battle in the Franco-Viet Minh War in 1954). This analogy was foolhardy, given American firepower and the proximity of Khe Sanh to supply lines and other US bases. President Johnson himself became obsessed by the spectre of 'Dien Bin Foo', as he famously referred to it. To follow the course of the battle, he had a sand-table model of the Khe Sanh plateau constructed in the White House situation room and took the unprecedented step of requiring a written guarantee from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Khe Sanh could be held.

Westmoreland, determined to avoid another Dien Bien Phu at all costs, assembled an armada of 5000 planes and helicopters and increased the number of troops at Khe Sanh to 6000. He even ordered his staff to study the feasibility of using tactical nuclear weapons.

The 75-day siege of Khe Sanh began on 21 January 1968 with a small-scale assault on the base perimeter. As the marines and the South Vietnamese Rangers braced for a full-scale ground attack, Khe Sanh became the focus of global media attention. It was the cover story for both *Newsweek* and *Life* magazines, and appeared on the front pages of countless newspapers around the world. During the next two months the base was subject to continuous ground attacks and artillery fire. US aircraft dropped 100,000 tonnes of explosives on the immediate vicinity of Khe Sanh Combat Base. The expected attempt to overrun the base never came and, on 7 April 1968 after heavy fighting, US troops reopened Hwy 9 and linked up with the marines to end the siege.

It now seems clear that the siege was merely an enormous diversion intended to draw US forces and the attention of their commanders away from the South Vietnamese population centres in preparation for the Tet Offensive, which began a week after the siege started. However, at the time, Westmoreland considered the entire Tet Offensive to be a 'diversionary effort' to distract attention from Khe Sanh.

After Westmoreland's tour of duty in Vietnam ended in July 1968, US forces in the area were redeployed. Policy had been reassessed and holding Khe Sanh, for which so many men had died, was deemed unnecessary. After everything at Khe Sanh was buried, trucked out or blown up (nothing recognisable that could be used in a North Vietnamese propaganda film was to remain), US forces upped and left Khe Sanh Combat Base under a curtain of secrecy. The American command had finally realised what a marine officer had expressed long before: 'When you're at Khe Sanh, you're not really anywhere. You could lose it and you really haven't lost a damn thing.'

In 1972 the South Vietnamese commander of the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Ton That Dinh, surrendered and joined the North Vietnamese Army.

These days there is not that much to see at Camp Carroll, except for a Vietnamese memorial marker, a few overgrown trenches and the remains of their timber roofs. Bits of military hardware and rusty shell casings can still be found. The concrete bunkers were destroyed by local people seeking to extract the steel reinforcing rods to sell as scrap. Concrete chunks from the bunkers were hauled off for use in construction.

The area around Camp Carroll now belongs to State Pepper Enterprises. On the road in, you'll see pepper plants trained so that they climb up the trunks of jackfruit trees. There are also rubber plantations nearby.

The turn-off to Camp Carroll is 10km west of Cam Lo and 23km northeast of Dakrong Bridge. The base is 3km from Hwy 9.

DONG HA

☎ 053 / pop 80,000

Like Dong Hoi to the north, Dong Ha awoke in 1954 to find that it had moved from the centre of the country to the edge of a heavily

militarised border. There's still an element of the Wild West to Dong Ha. It's not a particularly friendly or attractive place, and the scramble for tourist dollars borders on aggressive.

The capital of the reconstituted Quang Tri province, Dong Ha is at the busy intersection of Hwys 1A and 9. Dong Ha served as a US Marine Corps command and logistics centre from 1968 to 1969. In the spring of 1968 a division of North Vietnamese troops crossed the DMZ and attacked the city. Later it was the site of a South Vietnamese army base.

Today there is no conceivable reason to visit, save as a base to explore the DMZ or a stop on the way to the Lao border. Hwy 1A traffic thunders through town, dust blowing and horns blaring, and almost all the hotels are close by. The public loudspeakers start their broadcasting at 5am.

Orientation

Hwy 1A is called Đ Le Duan as it passes through Dong Ha. Hwy 9, with signs reading 'Lao Bao', intersects Hwy 1A next to the bus station.

Information

Dich Vu Internet (☎ 857 177; 177 Đ Le Duan)

Incobank (189 Đ Le Duan) Has an ATM in front of Sepon Travel.

Quang Tri Tourism (☎ 852 927; dmzqtri@dng.vnn.vn; 66 Đ Le Duan) Situated at the Mekong Hotel, this state office runs DMZ tours and arranges car rentals.

Sepon Travel (☎ 855 289; www.sepon.com.vn; 189 Đ Le Duan) Handles bookings for DMZ bus tours, buses to Savannakhet (Laos) and Vietnam Airlines. Can also arrange cars and drivers for private DMZ tours.

Sleeping

Hotel Mai Yen (☎ 551 750; 24 Đ Nguyen Trai; r 120,000-150,000d; 🍽) Situated on a leafy street just off the highway near the bus station, this is a friendly place with scrupulously clean rooms.

Melody Hotel (☎ 554 664; www.melodyhotel.net; 62 Đ Le Duan; s/d/tr 120,000/150,000/180,000d; 🍽) Although on the noisy highway, the sky-blue Melody Hotel has tidy rooms with all the usual facilities, as well as motorbikes for rent (80,000d per day).

Khach San Duong 9 Xanh (Highway 9 Hotel; ☎ 550 991; 4Đ Nguyen Trai; r US\$9-15; 🍽) On the same quiet strip as Mai Yen, the rooms are a little run down but they all have a TV, fridge and hot water.

Mekong Hotel (☎ 852 292; fax 855 234; 66 Đ Le Duan; r 150,000-200,000d; 🍽) With what looks like a taxidermied vampire deer in reception (check out the fangs), this larger hotel has clean and well-maintained rooms. Aim for one as far to the rear as possible to escape the highway noise. The hotel's restaurant is the breakfast stop for many DMZ bus tours from Hué.

Eating & Drinking

Trung Tam Lu Hanh (☎ 852 927; 66 Đ Le Duan; dishes 12,000d) One of a number of street-side eateries on the main highway, this one serves a decent *pho ga* (rice noodle soup with chicken).

Quan Chay Vegetarian House (☎ 854 634; 34 Đ Nguyen Trai; meals 20,000d) A small, tidy place on Dong Ha's nicest street.

A good breakfast option is the no-name **bakery** (☎ 859 356; 4Đ Hung Vuong; pastries 6000d) on Dong Ha's main street, running parallel to the highway. Nearby **Duy Tuong** (14Đ Hung Vuong) is a local café with an unlikely poster of '80s poodle-haired rockers Cinderella on the wall.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Dong Ha bus station (Ben Xe Khach Dong Ha; ☎ 851 488; 68 Đ Le Duan) is near the intersection of Hwys 1A and 9. Vehicles to Dong Hoi (30,000d, two hours), Hué (25,000d, 1½ hours), Khe Sanh (15,000d, 1½ hours) and Lao Bao (20,000d, two hours) depart regularly.

It is sometimes necessary to change buses in Khe Sanh for Lao Bao. Buses are also advertised to Savannakhet in Laos, but the station won't book a ticket for foreigners. You'll need to cross the road to Sepon Travel (left).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

Road distances from Dong Ha are: Dong Hoi (95km), Hué (77km), Danang (190km), Khe Sanh (65km), Lao Bao (85km) and Vinh Moc (41km).

Motorbike hire tours to the DMZ start from US\$10. A one-way car trip to the Lao Bao border will set you back US\$25. Motorbikes can be hired from Melody Hotel (left).

TRAIN

Reunification Express trains stop in **Dong Ha Train Station** (Ga Dong Ha; ☎ 850 631; 2Đ Le Thanh Ton). Destinations include Hanoi (235,000d, 12½ to 15½ hours, four daily), Dong Hoi (38,000d, two to 2½ hours, six daily) and Hué (25,000d, 1½ to 2½ hours, six daily).

To get to the Dong Ha train station from the bus station, head 1km southeast on Hwy 1A to a big guesthouse called Nha Khach 261. Turn right here and the back of the train station is about 150m over the tracks.

LAO BAO (LAOS BORDER)

☎ 053 / pop 33,000

Lao Bao, on the Sepon River (Song Xe Pon), which marks the Vietnam-Laos border, is an important crossing for trade and tourism between the two countries. Towering above Lao Bao on the Laos side of the border is Co Roc Mountain, once a North Vietnamese artillery stronghold.

There is a huge border market on the Vietnamese side, where goods smuggled from Thailand are readily available. Merchants accept either Vietnamese dong or Lao kip. Don't change US dollars at the border unless you have to: the rate can be about 50% lower than the banks.

There's no reason to linger in Lao Bao, but if you miss the border opening hours (see p210) and need a place to stay, **Bao Son Hotel** (☎ 877 848; fax 877 660; r US\$12; 🍽) is a smart business hotel and good value for the money. There is the inevitable row of *com pho* (rice-noodle soup) places in the centre of town.

Lao Bao town is 18km west of Khe Sanh, 85km from Dong Ha, 152km from Hué, 45km east of Sepon (Laos) and 255km east of Savannakhet (Laos).

QUANG TRI

☎ 053 / pop 15,400

Quang Tri was once an important citadel city. In the spring of 1972 four divisions of North Vietnamese regulars, backed by tanks, artillery and rockets, poured across the DMZ into Quang Tri province in what became known as the Eastertide Offensive. They laid siege to Quang Tri town, shelling it heavily before capturing it along with the rest of the province.

During the next four months the city was almost completely obliterated by South Vietnamese artillery and carpet bombing by US fighter-bombers and B-52s. The South Vietnamese army suffered 5000 casualties in the rubble-to-rubble fighting to retake the city.

Today there is little to see except a few remains of the moat, ramparts and gates of the Citadel, which once served as a South Vietnamese army headquarters. The remnants are 1.6km north from Hwy 1A. Along Hwy 1A,

on the Hué side of Quang Tri, is the skeleton of a church chillingly scarred with bullet holes and mortar shells.

The **bus station** (Đ Tran Hung Dao) is about 1km from Hwy 1A, but buses can just as easily be flagged down on the side of the road.

HUÉ

☎ 054 / pop 311,700

If art and architecture matter more to you than beaches and beer, Hué will be high on your Vietnam must-visit list. The capital of the Nguyen emperors, Hué is packed with temples, tombs, palaces and pagodas – or at least the remains of those that successive armies didn't manage to completely destroy. Foodies won't want to miss the fussy degustation-style Imperial cuisine for which this city is rightly famous.

On the banks of the enigmatically named Perfume River, the peculiar light of this historic place imbues photographs with a hazy, purple tinge. It would all be quite idyllic if it weren't for the constant dogging most tourists face as soon as they step off the bus. The touts in Hué are more incessant than most.

While the offshoots of mass tourism may be annoying, it should be remembered that Hué's cultural sites were destined for oblivion without it. After 1975 they were left to decay – Imperialist reminders of the feudal Nguyen dynasty. In 1990 that the local People's Committee recognised the potential of the place and declared these sites 'national treasures'. In 1993 Unesco designated the complex of monuments in Hué a World Heritage site, and restoration and preservation work continues.

The **Festival of Hué** is celebrated biennially in even-numbered years, with local and international cultural performers at locations throughout the city. Hotel accommodation is at a premium at this time, so book ahead if you can.

History

The citadel city of Phu Xuan was built in 1687, 5km northeast of present-day Hué. In 1744 Phu Xuan became the capital of the southern part of Vietnam, which was under the rule of the Nguyen lords. The Tay Son Rebels occupied the city from 1786 until 1802, when it fell to Nguyen Anh. He crowned himself Emperor Gia Long, thus founding the Nguyen dynasty, which ruled the country – at least in name – until 1945.

BORDER CROSSING: LAO BAO/DANSAVANH

The **Lao Bao border** (☎ 7am-6pm) is the most popular and least problematic crossing between Laos and Vietnam. You can get a 30-day Lao visa (US\$30) on arrival in Dansavanh, but Vietnamese visas still need to be arranged in advance; drop in on the Vietnamese consulate in Savannakhet.

Dong Ha is the junction town for Lao Bao, with regular bus services (see p208). Sepon Travel in Dong Ha (see p208) has buses to Savannakhet (US\$12, 7½ hours), continuing on to Vientiane (13 hours); they leave Dong Ha at 8am every second day and return the next day. These buses also pass through Hué (US\$14 to US\$15, add 1½ hours), and can be booked from the Mandarin and Sinh Cafés (see opposite). If you're travelling across the border by tourist bus, expect a wait while documents are checked. When booking a tourist bus, make sure to confirm (preferably in writing) that the same bus carries on through the border. We've heard plenty of stories of tourists being bundled off nice buses on the Vietnam side and on to overcrowded local buses once they reach Laos.

The border post used to be 2km from Lao Bao town, but the town has expanded so fast it runs almost up to the border. From the bus station the local price for a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) to the border is 5000d (foreigners pay about 10,000d), or walk it in about 20 minutes. Between the Vietnam and Laos border posts is a short walk of a few hundred metres.

Once in Laos there is only one public bus a day direct to Savannakhet, which leaves when full. *Sawngthaew* (pick-up trucks) leave fairly regularly to Sepon, from where you can get a bus or further *sawngthaew* to Savannakhet.

Coming the other way, Route 9 from Savannakhet to the border is now one of the best roads in Laos. From Savannakhet, buses (US\$3, 255km, five hours) leave at 7am and noon for the border. Alternatively, take a *sawngthaew* to Sepon (US\$3, 210km, four hours) and another from there to the border (US\$1.20, 45km, one hour).

Travellers coming from Laos should be aware that no public buses go directly to Hué, despite what drivers may tell you! Some through-buses arrive at the border after it's closed, making for an uncomfortable overnight wait – we've had reports from travellers who have been groped and manhandled while trying to catch some sleep on buses packed with coal and rice.

In 1885, when the advisers of 13-year-old Emperor Ham Nghi objected to French activities in Tonkin, French forces encircled the city. Unwisely, the outnumbered Vietnamese forces launched an attack; the French responded mercilessly. According to a contemporary French account, the French forces took three days to burn the imperial library and remove from the palace every single object of value – everything from gold and silver ornaments to mosquito nets and toothpicks. Ham Nghi fled to Laos, but he was eventually captured and exiled to Algeria. The French replaced him with the more pliable Dong Khanh, thus ending any pretence of genuine independence for Vietnam.

Hué was the site of the bloodiest battles of the 1968 Tet Offensive and was the only city in South Vietnam to be held by the Communists for more than a few days. While the American command was concentrating its energies on Khe Sanh, North Vietnamese and VC troops skirted the American stronghold and walked right into Hué.

Immediately on taking the city, political cadres implemented detailed plans to remove Hué's 'uncooperative' elements. Thousands of people were rounded up in extensive house-to-house searches, conducted according to lists of names meticulously prepared months before.

During the 3½ weeks Hué remained under Northern control, over 2500 people – including wealthy merchants, government workers, monks, priests and intellectuals – were summarily shot, clubbed to death or buried alive. Shallow mass graves were discovered at various spots around the city over the following few years.

When the South Vietnamese army units proved unable to dislodge the occupying North Vietnamese and VC forces, General Westmoreland ordered US troops to recapture the city. Over the next few weeks, whole neighbourhoods were levelled by VC rockets and US bombs.

Over the next month, most of the area inside the Citadel was battered by the South Vietnamese air force, US artillery and bru-

tal house-to-house fighting. Approximately 10,000 people died in Hué, including thousands of VC troops, 400 South Vietnamese soldiers and 150 US marines, but most of those killed were civilians.

Journalist Gavin Young's 1997 memoir *A Wavering Grace* is a moving account of his 30-year relationship with a family from Hué, and with the city itself, during and beyond the American War. It makes a good literary companion for a stay in the city.

Orientation

The city of Hué lies along either side of the Perfume River. The north side of the river is dominated by the Citadel and has a quieter local feel, while the south side has most of the tourist hotels and restaurants. The island on which the Phu Cat and Phu Hiep subdistricts are located can be reached by crossing the Dong Ba Canal near Dong Ba Market.

MAPS

The fold-up *Hué Tourism Map* (5000d) is available in tourist outlets; there's not much detail, but handy to stuff in the pocket.

Information**INTERNET ACCESS**

There are lots of internet cafés on the tourist strips of Đ Hung Vuong and Đ Le Loi, and a fast, cheap service can be found at the main post office and at **Huonet 2** (22B Đ Le Loi; per hr 2000d).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hué Central Hospital (Benh Vien Trung Uong Hué; ☎ 822 325; 16 Đ Le Loi)

MONEY

Vietcombank (☎ 824 572; 78 Đ Hung Vuong) has an ATM and exchanges travellers cheques and foreign currency. There's another **Vietcombank branch** (30 Đ Le Loi; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) located at the Hotel Saigon Morin. You can find a **Vietcombank ATM** (Đ Luong The Vinh) outside the Imperial Hotel and another **Vietcombank ATM** (5 Đ Le Loi) located outside La Residence Hotel.

POST

Main post office (☎ 823 468; 8 Đ Hoang Hoa Thám; ☎ 6am-9.30pm); Đ Le Loi (☎ 832 072; 38 Đ Le Loi); Đ Ly Thuong Kiet (☎ 825 850; 14 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet); Đ Bui Thi Xuan (☎ 823 109; 1 Đ Bui Thi Xuan) Postal, internet and telephone services.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Café on Thu Wheels (☎ 832 241; minhthuhue@yahoo.com; 10/2 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) Immensely popular cycling and motorbiking tours around Hué with a large dose of laughs.

Mandarin Café (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vnn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong) Watched over by the eagle eyes of photographer Mr Cu, this place is great for information, transport and tours.

Sinh Café (☎ 823 309; www.sinhcafe.vn.com; 7 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong) Books open-tour buses and buses to Laos.

Sights & Activities**CITADEL**

Most of Hué's sights and a sizeable chunk of its population reside within the 2m-thick, 10km-long walls of its **Citadel** (Kinh Thanh) on the north bank of the river. Begun in 1804 on a site chosen by Emperor Gia Long's geomancers, it was originally made of earth and later strengthened with brick.

Roughly square shaped, three sides of the Citadel are straight; the fourth is rounded slightly to follow the curve of the river. The ramparts are encircled by a zigzag moat, which is 30m across and about 4m deep. There are 10 fortified gates, each accessed via a bridge. In the northern corner of the Citadel is Mang Ca Fortress, which is still used as a military base.

At the centre of the wall facing the river, the 37m-high **Flag Tower** (Cot Co) is Vietnam's tallest flagpole. Erected in 1809 and extended in 1831, it was knocked down in 1904 by a typhoon that devastated the city. It was rebuilt in 1915 only to be destroyed again in 1947. Two years later it was erected once again, in its present form. During the VC occupation in 1968, the National Liberation Front flag flew defiantly from the tower for 3½ weeks.

Located just inside the Citadel ramparts, near the gates to either side of the Flag Tower, the **Nine Holy Cannons**, symbolic protectors of the palace and kingdom, were cast in 1804 from brass captured from the Tay Son Rebels. Commissioned by Emperor Gia Long, they were never intended to be fired. Each is 5m long, has a bore of 23cm and weighs about 10 tonnes. The four cannons near **Ngan Gate** represent the four seasons, while the five cannons next to **Quang Duc Gate** represent the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth.

IMPERIAL ENCLOSURE

Housing the emperor's residence and the main buildings of state, the **Imperial Enclosure** (admission

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55,000d; ☎ 6.30am-5.30pm summer, 7am-5.30pm winter) is a citadel-within-a-citadel, with 6m-high walls that are 2.5km in length. The enclosure was badly bombed during the French and American wars, and a large part of it is still park-like ruins. Restoration of the least damaged sections and the complete rebuilding of others is an ongoing project.

The Enclosure is divided into several walled sections, with the Forbidden Purple City (opposite) at its centre. The formal state palaces are between this and the main gate. Around the perimeter are a collection of temples and residences, the better preserved of which are along the southwestern wall. Situated along the opposite wall, nearest to the main gate are the ruins of the **Thai To Mieu temple complex** (now housing a plant nursery) and behind it the **University of Arts**, housed in the former Royal Treasury. To the rear of this is a park and lake, spreading into the far corner, where a couple of elephants are kept.

This is a fascinating site, which you could easily spend the better part of a day exploring. It's completely iniquitous that most day tours include a only brief stop here – it's easily reached on foot from anywhere in Huế and much more enjoyable as a leisurely stroll.

Ngo Mon Gate

The principal entrance to the Imperial Enclosure is **Ngo Mon Gate** (Noontime Gate; 1833), which faces the Flag Tower. The central passageway with its yellow doors was reserved for the use of the emperor, as was the bridge across the lotus pond. Other mere mortals had to use the gates to either side and the paths around the pond.

On top of the gate is **Ngu Phung** (Belvedere of the Five Phoenixes), where the emperor appeared on important occasions, most notably for the promulgation of the lunar calendar. On 30 August 1945 the Nguyen dynasty ended here when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated to a delegation sent by Ho Chi Minh's Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Thai Hoa Palace

Built in 1803, **Thai Hoa Palace** (Palace of Supreme Harmony) is a spacious hall with an ornate timber roof supported by 80 carved and lacquered columns. It was used for the emperor's official receptions and other important court ceremonies, such as anniversaries and coronations. During state occasions the emperor sat on his elevated throne and his mandarins paid homage. Nine stelae divide the two-level courtyard into separate areas for officials in

each of the nine ranks of the mandarin; administrative mandarins stood to one side while the military mandarins stood to the other.

Halls of the Mandarins

The buildings in which the mandarins prepared for court ceremonies were restored in 1977. The structures are located directly behind Thai Hoa Palace on either side of a courtyard, where there are two gargantuan bronze *vac dong* (cauldrons) dating from the 17th century. The hall to the left has been set up for cheesy tourist photos; you can pose in Imperial costume on the throne for 20,000d, while two flunkies will pose with you for 40,000d. The opposite hall houses a collection of gowns and porcelain from the Nguyen era.

Behind the courtyard are the ruins of the **Can Chanh Palace**, a large hall for receptions.

Forbidden Purple City

Behind the palaces, in the very centre of the Imperial Enclosure, the **Forbidden Purple City** (Fu Gam Thanh) is a citadel-within-a-citadel-within-a-citadel. Reserved solely for the personal use of the emperor, the only servants allowed into this compound were eunuchs who would pose no threat to the royal concubines. It was almost entirely destroyed in the wars, and a large part is now draped in green foliage. Take care as you wander around the ruins as there are some gaping holes.

To the right the **Royal Theatre** (Duyen Thi Duong; tickets 20,000d), begun in 1826 and later home to the National Conservatory of Music, has been rebuilt on the former foundations. Cultural performances are held here daily at 9am, 10am, 2.30pm and 3.30pm.

Behind this, the two-storey **Emperor's Reading Room** (Thai Binh Lau), decorated with interesting roof mosaics, was the only part of the Forbidden Purple City to have escaped damage during the French reoccupation of Huế in 1947.

To Mieu Temple Complex

Taking up the south corner of the Imperial Enclosure, this walled complex dedicated to the Nguyen emperors has been beautifully restored.

After entering through the ornate temple gate, you must then pass through the three-tiered **Hien Lam Pavilion**. On the other side of

this stand **Nine Dynastic Urns**. These *dinh* (urns) were cast between 1835 and 1836, each dedicated to a different Nguyen sovereign. Engraved into the sides are heavenly bodies and landscapes. About 2m in height and weighing 1900kg to 2600kg each, the urns symbolise the power and stability of the Nguyen throne. The central urn, which is the largest and most ornate, is dedicated to Gia Long.

Also in the courtyard are two dragons, trapped in what look like phone boxes.

On the other side of the courtyard is the long, low, red and gold **To Mieu Temple** itself. Inside are shrines to each of the emperors, topped by their photos. Under the French only the seven liked by the colonial power were thus honoured – Ham Nghi, Thanh Thai and Duy Tan were only added in 1959. The temple is flanked on the right by a small robing house and on the left by a shrine to a soil god.

Behind each of these, a gate leads into the next part of the complex – a Divine Kitchen and Divine Storehouse sit on either side of a small walled enclosure housing the **Hung To Mieu Temple**. This is a restored 1951 reconstruction of the original, built in 1804 to honour Gia Long's parents. Both temples were used by the court on death anniversaries, but women (including the Empress) were strictly forbidden.

Phung Tien Temple

Behind To Mieu, **Phung Tien Temple** still lies in ruins. It once served a similar purpose to the former, although women were permitted to worship here.

Dien Tho Residence

Behind the two temples is the stunning, partially ruined **Dien Tho Residence** (1804). This comprised the apartments and audience hall of the Queen Mothers of the Nguyen dynasty. The audience hall houses an exhibition of photos illustrating its former use, and there is a display of embroidered royal garments. Just outside is their Highnesses' enchanting pleasure pavilion, a carved wooden building set above a lily pond.

Truong San Residence

The rebuilding of this war-devastated compound was near to completion at the time of research. This landscaped flower garden was originally constructed under Emperor Minh

Mang in 1822, comprising a crescent-shaped lake, a rockery, palace and pagoda. In 1844 Emperor Thieu Tri, acting like a latter-day magazine editor, listed it as one of the top 20 beautiful spots in Hué.

TINH TAM LAKE

In the middle of Tinh Tam Lake, which is 500m north of the Imperial Enclosure, are two islands connected by bridges. The emperors used to come here with their retinues to relax. Now the bridge has been appropriated by fisherman.

TANG TAU LAKE

An island on Tang Tau Lake, which is north-east of Tinh Tam Lake, was once the site of a royal library. It is now occupied by a small Theravada Buddhist pagoda, called Ngoc Huong Pagoda.

MUSEUMS

Museum of Royal Fine Arts

The beautiful hall that houses the **Museum of Royal Fine Arts** (3 Đ Le Truc; admission 22,000d; ☎ 7am-5pm) was built in 1845 and restored when the museum was founded in 1923. The walls are inscribed with poems written in *nom* (Vietnamese script). The most precious artefacts were lost during the American War, but the ceramics, furniture and royal clothing that remain are well worth the visit. The outside courtyard has interesting ceremonial cannons, stone court sculptures and large brass bells and vats.

General Museum Complex

The equally exquisite building across the street was once a school for princes and the sons of high-ranking mandarins. It's now a gallery, and forms part of the **General Museum Complex** (☎ 522 397; Đ 23 Thang 8; admission free; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sun). It combines, in an odd juxtaposition, a pagoda devoted to archaeology, a small Natural History Museum and a building devoted to the 'movement of revolutionary struggle and anti-French colonialism resistance war'. There's a tank collection out front.

Ho Chi Minh Museum

On display at this **museum** (☎ 822 152; 7 Đ Le Loi; admission 10,000d; ☎ 7am-2pm Tue-Sun) are photographs, some of Ho Chi Minh's personal effects, and documents relating to his life and accomplishments. All have English captions.

PAGODAS

Bao Quoc Pagoda

Last renovated in 1957, **Bao Quoc Pagoda** (Pagoda Which Serves the Country; ☎ 820 488; Ham Long Hill) was founded in 1670 by Giac Phong, a Buddhist monk from China. It was given its present name in 1824 by Emperor Minh Mang, who celebrated his 40th birthday here in 1830.

To get here, head south from Đ Le Loi on Đ Dien Bien Phu and turn first right after crossing the railway tracks.

Dieu De National Pagoda

The entrance to **Dieu De National Pagoda** (Quoc Tu Dieu De; 102 Đ Bach Dang), built under Emperor Thieu Tri's rule (1841-47), is along Dong Ba Canal. It is one of the city's three 'national pagodas', which were once under the direct patronage of the emperor. Dieu De is famous for its four low towers, one to either side of the gate and two flanking the sanctuary. There are bells in two of the towers; the others contain a drum and a stele dedicated to the emperor.

During the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem (1955-63) and through the mid-1960s, Dieu De National Pagoda was a stronghold of Buddhist and student opposition to the South Vietnamese government and the war. In 1966 the pagoda was stormed by police, who confiscated the opposition movement's radio equipment and arrested many monks, laypeople and students.

The pavilions on either side of the main sanctuary entrance contain the 18 La Ha, whose rank is just below that of Bodhisattva, and the eight Kim Cang, protectors of Buddha. In the back row of the main dais is Thich Ca Buddha flanked by two assistants.

Chieu Ung Pagoda

Founded by the Hainan Chinese Congregation in the mid-19th century, **Chieu Ung Pagoda** (Chieu Ung Tu; opposite 138 Đ Chi Lang) was rebuilt in 1908. The pagoda's sanctuary retains its original ornamentation, which is becoming faded but has been mercifully unaffected by the third-rate modernistic renovations that have marred other such structures. The pagoda was built as a memorial to 108 Hainan merchants, who were mistaken for pirates and killed in Vietnam in 1851.

Chua Ong Pagoda

Founded by Hué's Fujian Chinese Congregation during the reign of Vietnamese emperor

Tu Duc (1848-83), **Chua Ong Pagoda** (opposite 224 Đ Chi Lang) was severely damaged during the Tet Offensive when a nearby ammunition ship blew up. A gold Buddha sits in a glass case opposite the main doors of the sanctuary. The left-hand altar is dedicated to the goddess of the sea, Thien Hau Thanh Mau, who is flanked by her two assistants, 1000-eyed Thien Ly Nhan and red-faced Thuan Phong Nhi, who can hear for 1000 miles.

NATIONAL SCHOOL

One of the most famous secondary schools in Vietnam, the **National School** (Truong Quoc Hoc; 10 Đ Le Loi; ☎ after 3pm) was founded in 1896 and run by Ngo Dinh Kha, the father of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem. Many of the school's pupils later rose to prominence in both North and South Vietnam. One of them was General Vo Nguyen Giap, strategist of the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu and North Vietnam's long-serving deputy premier, defence minister and commander-in-chief. Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam's prime minister for over a quarter of a century, and the secretary-general and former prime minister Do Muoi also studied here. Even Ho Chi Minh attended the school briefly in 1908.

The school was given a major renovation in 1996 to celebrate its 100th anniversary and a statue of Ho Chi Minh was erected. The National School cannot be visited until after classes finish.

BOAT TRIPS

Many sights in the vicinity of Hué, including Thuan An Beach, Thien Mu Pagoda and several of the Royal Tombs (p221), can be reached by a journey along the Perfume River.

Rates for chartering a boat are around 60,000d for an hour's sightseeing on the river; a half-day charter to one or more sites will cost around 150,000d. Ask directly at any of the four main river-boat moorings on the south side of the river; it's cheaper than chartering through an agency and you can negotiate your own route. Be clear on your requirements, preferably in writing; you may find yourself paying more for lunch at the family's restaurant than for the boat.

Most hotels and travellers' cafés are keen to push shared tours, which typically take in the tombs of Tu Duc, Thieu Tri, Minh Mang and the Thien Mu Pagoda. Prices vary, but are generally implausibly cheap at around

US\$2 per person (which may include lunch but not entry fees). The journey takes about six hours, and usually runs from 8am to 2pm. Given the time constraints you'll need to catch a motorbike to get from the moorings to the first two tombs. The third tomb's less than a kilometre's walk, but they'll try to get you on a bike for that one as well. Once the various entry fees have been factored in, many travellers wish they had cycled or arranged a motorbike instead.

Sleeping BUDGET

There are two main clusters of budget accommodation on the south side of the river. One is in the triangle formed by Đ Hung Vuong, Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong and Đ Hanoi. The other is a few blocks north in the little laneways between Đ Le Loi and Đ Vo Thi Sau. The numerous guesthouses offer varying degrees of comfort for invariably cheap rates; given their proximity it's easy to shop around. The trade-off is that this puts you in the heart of tourist town, where the hawks swoop before your hotel door closes behind you.

Phong Nha Hotel (☎ 827 729; phongnha_hotel@yahoo.com; 10/10 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US\$6-15; ☎ ☎) The facilities in this spotless minihotel differ from room to room, but what doesn't change is the good reports we hear about the friendly and enthusiastic staff.

Binh Duong Hotel 2 (☎ 846 466; 8 Đ Ngo Gia Tu; r US\$8-15; ☎ ☎) On a side street a little apart from the main tourist scrum, this hotel has rooms ranging from cheapies with internal windows to larger ones with bathtubs and balconies.

Thai Binh Hotel 1 (☎ 828 058; www.thaibinhhotel-hue.com; 6/34 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; r US\$8-18; ☎ ☎) An excellent option, Thai Binh offers midrange standards at budget prices.

DMZ Hotel (☎ 826 831; 1A Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s/d US\$9-14; ☎ ☎) From the people behind the popular tourist bar, this brand-new minihotel has a range of comfortable rooms of different sizes and facilities.

Minh Quang Guest House (☎ 824 152; 16 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$10; ☎ ☎) Located near the railway station, a long way from tourist traps, this friendly family offers new, clean rooms with TVs, fridges and bathtubs. English is not their strong point.

Bamboo Hotel (☎ 828 345; www.bamboohotel.net; 61 Đ Hung Vuong; s/d US\$10/12; ☎ ☎) The owners

made an effort with the décor, with (unsurprisingly) bamboo decoration downstairs and elaborate green cornices in the rooms. The bedding's nice and all the rooms have TVs, fridges and bathtubs.

our pick **Thai Binh Hotel 2** (☎ 827 561; www.thai-binhhotel-hue.com; 2 Đ Luong The Vinh; r US\$12-15; 🏠 📺) The recently arrived, more upmarket sister of the longstanding budget favourite, Thai Binh 2 is excellent value for money. The attractive bedrooms have mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, while the bathrooms have tubs and novelties such as shower curtains. There are stunning views from balconies on the higher floors.

Thanh Tan Hotel (☎ 824 146; thanhtancom@dng.vnn.vn; 12 Đ Nguyen Van Cu; s/d US\$12/15; 🏠 📺) A similar standard is set at this superb new place, just removed from the main tourist neighbourhood.

Thanh Thao Hotel (☎ 831 358; thanhthaohotel@yahoo.com; 33 Đ Nguyen Truong To; r 250,000đ; 🏠 📺) On what would be a quiet street near the Catholic cathedral if it weren't for the railway tracks, Thanh Thao has comfortable rooms with good facilities including wi-fi internet access.

MIDRANGE

Duy Tan Hotel (☎ 825 001; nkduytan@dng.vnn.vn; 12 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$10-25; 🏠 📺) About as central as it gets, the more expensive rooms are large and bright and have balconies.

Thanh Noi Hotel (Imperial Garden; ☎ 522 478; thanhnoi@dng.vnn.vn; 57 Đ Dang Dung; r US\$18-45; 🏠 📺) Located in a quiet street in the heart of the Citadel, near the Imperial Enclosure, the residential surroundings offer a very different view of Huế life. The peaceful tree-shaded compound has a restaurant and a fair-sized swimming pool with water jets.

Hoa Hong Hotel (☎ 824 377; hoahonghotel@dng.vnn.vn; 1 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s US\$25-70, d US\$30-80; 🏠 📺) Although a little older, the rooms are well-appointed – some with views, spa baths and (luxury of luxuries) shower curtains. Breakfast is included in the price.

Ngoc Huong Hotel (☎ 830 111; www.ngochuonghotels.com; 8-10 Đ Chu Van An; r US\$30-40, ste US\$80; 🏠 📺) Located in a popular part of town, this is a smart, friendly hotel. The large rooms include all the creature comforts one might want, plus there's a Jacuzzi and sauna for winding down.

Hue Heritage Hotel (☎ 838 888; www.hueheritagehotel.com; 9 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; r US\$40-80, ste US\$90-120; 🏠 📺) The mock-classical frontage sets the scene for an upmarket hotel, with a cool

roof-top swimming pool. The comfortable rooms have space-age massaging showers and wooden floors.

TOP END

La Residence Hotel & Spa (☎ 837 475; www.la-residence-hue.com; 5 Đ Le Loi; r US\$95-135, ste US\$150-165; 🏠 📺) Housed in the former French Governor's residence, this chic boutique hotel has lovely river views, lush gardens and beautiful rooms. The Colonial suites are ostentatiously themed: *Suite d'Ornithologie*, *Monuments d'Egypte* and *Voyage en Chine*.

Imperial Hotel (☎ 882 222; www.imperial-hotel.com.vn; 8 Đ Hung Vuong; r US\$159, ste US\$239-719; 🏠 📺) Hello big boy! Critics will surely bemoan the arrival of historic Hue's first hefty hotel tower – but this 16-floor, five-star megalith is actually pretty fab. The grand lobby has a dramatic lotus-shaped chandelier, and a number of excellent bars and restaurants carry on the opulence.

Eating

We have the famed fussy-eater Emperor Tu Duc to thank for the culinary variety of Huế (see p48). While the elaborate decoration of Imperial cuisine may seem a little silly, the *degustation*-style banquets are sublime – well worthy of a splurge. The best restaurants aren't necessarily easy to find, and many tourists sadly settle for the Western-oriented eateries of the budget ghettos.

A local speciality worth hunting for is the royal rice cakes, the most common of which is *banh khoai*. You'll find these along with other variations (*banh beo*, *banh loc*, *banh it* and *banh nam*) in restaurants around Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem, on the island to the northeast of the Citadel. For another gastronomic adventure, explore the noodle stalls set up around the Citadel at night.

Vegetarian food has a long tradition in Huế. Stalls in the **Dong Ba Market** (Đ Tran Hung Dao; dishes 5000-10,000đ) serve lots of options on the first and 15th days of the lunar month. You'll find several veggie options on most menus in town, some using soya-bean mock meat.

VIETNAMESE

Ngo Co Nhan (☎ 513 399; 47 Đ Nguyen Bieu; dishes 15,000-35,000đ; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Raised up on stilts in a quiet Citadel street, this open-sided dining platform serves excellent grilled seafood and beer to a mainly Vietnamese clientele.

Tropical Garden Restaurant (☎ 847 143; 27 Đ Chu Van An; dishes 22,000-85,000đ; 🍷 dinner) This popular place offers romantic dining in a lush garden. It specialises in central Vietnamese cuisine, and is the best place in Huế to catch a traditional music performance (from 7pm nightly). While it's a regular stop for tour groups, they don't tend to spoil the atmosphere – although they do slow the service down.

Temple Restaurant (☎ 830 716; 5 Đ Chu Van An; dishes 22,000-85,000đ; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A similar option, but this one has a stylish indoor dining room.

our pick **Y Thao Garden** (☎ 523 018; 3 Đ Thach Han; set-course meal US\$8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Tucked in a quiet corner of the Citadel, a seven-course set menu is served among the huge palms on the garden terrace of a traditional Huế home that's brimming with antiques. This is Imperial cuisine at its fiddliest – peacocks with carved carrot heads and pineapple-stalk tails play pin-cushion to spring rolls on toothpicks, and green bean cakes are moulded to look like fruit and served on a branch. The overall experience is enchanting – particularly on a steamy night with the rain battering the tropical garden. It's best to book ahead, as it can get busy.

INTERNATIONAL

Mandarin Café (☎ 821 281; mandarin@dng.vnn.vn; 3 Đ Hung Vuong; dishes 5000-40,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A magnet for travellers, the cheerful owner, Mr Cu, speaks English and French and serves big dollops of travel advice along with *pho*, BLTs, salads and pancakes.

Hung Vuong Inn (☎ 821 068; 20 Đ Hung Vuong; pastries/meals 5000/30,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right in the heart of the budget strip, this little guesthouse is a great breakfast option, serving delicious French-style pastries and bread. More expansive meals featuring Huế specialities are also on offer.

Japanese Restaurant (☎ 834 457; 34 Đ Tran Cao Van; dishes US\$1-8) There's no prizes for guessing the cuisine on offer. What's more surprising is the heart-warming story behind it (see the boxed text, p220). The food's excellent and the service exceptionally polite.

Minh & Coco Mini Restaurant (☎ 821 822; 1 Đ Hung Vuong; mains 10,000-30,000đ) Run by two lively sisters, this humble joint is a fun place to get an inexpensive feed.

Phuong Nam Café (☎ 849 317; 38 Đ Tan Cao Van; mains 10,000-30,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little eatery has good, cheap food and amazing fruit shakes.

La Carambole (☎ 810 491; 19 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 25,000-90,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Extravagantly decorated with hanging lanterns and dragon's heads, this place has a good range of French-style dishes, including steaks and grills. There are also Vietnamese dishes and pizza to keep everyone happy, plus a healthy wine list.

Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant (☎ 821 616; 10 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; curries 30,000-60,000đ) This vegetarian-friendly curry house is low on atmosphere but high on flavour.

Drinking

Cathi 24 (☎ 831 210; 64 Đ Le Loi) Based in and around the garden of a French-colonial home, this little café specialises in therapeutic herbal teas – although the less pure will also find caffeine and alcohol on offer. At night it's particularly romantic, lit up with oil lamps. Order a drink and free plates of crackers, bread and fruit keep arriving.

DMZ Bar & Cafe (44 Đ Le Loi) Long the leading late-night spot, the beer flows into the night, the tunes match the mood and there is a popular pool table in the middle of things.

Bar Why Not? (☎ 824 793; 21 Đ Vo Thi Sau) Loud rock music, cheap cocktails and a pool table make for a winning formula. Why not, indeed?

King's Panorama Bar (☎ 882 222; www.imperialhotel.com.vn; 8 Đ Hung Vuong; 🍷 7am-midnight) Quite the swankiest (and priciest) boozier in town, the rooftop of the Imperial Hotel has tasteful décor and unhindered views.

Shopping

Huế produces the finest conical hats in Vietnam. The city's speciality is 'poem hats', which, when held up to the light, reveal shadowy scenes of daily life. It's also home to one of the largest and most beautiful selections of rice-paper and silk paintings available in Vietnam, but the prices quoted are usually inflated to about four times the real price.

Dong Ba Market (Đ Tran Hung Dao; 🍷 6.30am-8pm) On the Perfume River north of Trang Tien Bridge, this is Huế's largest market, where anything and everything can be bought.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The main office of **Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 824 709; 23 Đ Nguyen Van Cu; 🍷 7.15-11.15am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) handles reservations. Several flights a day connect Huế to both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

A FIERY PROTEST

Behind the main sanctuary of the Thien Mu Pagoda is the Austin motorcar that transported the monk Thich Quang Duc to the site of his 1963 self-immolation. Thich Quang Duc travelled to Saigon and publicly burned himself to death to protest the policies of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. A famous photograph of his act was printed on the front pages of newspapers around the world. His death soon inspired a number of other self-immolations.

The response of the president's notorious sister-in-law, Tran Le Xuan (Madame Nhu), was to happily proclaim the self-immolations a 'barbecue party', saying 'Let them burn and we shall clap our hands'. Her statements greatly added to the already substantial public disgust with Diem's regime; the US press labelled Madame Nhu the 'Iron Butterfly' and 'Dragon Lady'. In November both President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu (Madame Nhu's husband) were assassinated by Diem's own military. Madame Nhu was overseas at the time.

Another self-immolation sparked more protest in 1993. In this instance a man arrived at the pagoda and, after leaving offerings, set himself alight chanting the word 'Buddha'. Although the man's motivation remains a mystery, this set off a chain of events whereby the pagoda's leading monks were arrested, linked with the independent United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the banned alternative to the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Church. This led to an official complaint to the UN by the International Federation of Human Rights accusing the Vietnamese government of violating its own constitution, protecting freedom of religion.

along the banks of the Perfume River between 2km and 16km south of Huế. While many of the tombs can be reached by boat, you'll have more time to enjoy them by renting your own bicycle or motorbike – if getting lost is part of the fun – or hiring a *xe om* (motorbike taxis) or car for the day (see p221).

TOMB OF TU DUC

The majestic and serene **tomb of Tu Duc** (admission 55,000d) is set amid frangipani and pine trees. Emperor Tu Duc designed the exquisitely harmonious tomb, which was constructed between 1864 and 1867, for use both before and after his death. The enormous expense of the tomb and the forced labour used in its construction spawned a coup plot that was discovered and suppressed in 1866.

It is said that Tu Duc, who had the longest reign of any Nguyen monarch (1848–83), lived a life of ultimate imperial luxury. Though he had 104 wives and countless concubines, he had no offspring. One theory has it that he became sterile after contracting smallpox.

His tomb is entered from the southeast via Vu Khiem Gate. A path leads to a boat landing on the shore of a lake. The island to the right is where Tu Duc used to hunt small game. Across the water to the left is Xung Khiem Pavilion, built on piles over the water, where the emperor would sit among the columns with his concubines, composing or reciting poetry.

Across the courtyard from the landing are steps leading to Hoa Khiem Temple, where Tu Duc and Empress Hoang Le Thien Anh (Tu Duc's wife) are worshipped. Before his death, Tu Duc used this as a palace, staying here during his long visits to the complex. It contains a number of interesting items, including two thrones, the larger of which was for the empress (Tu Duc was only 153cm tall).

Minh Khiem Chamber, to the right behind Hoa Khiem Temple, was originally built for use as a theatre. Tu Duc's mother, Tu Du, is worshipped in Luong Khiem Temple, directly behind Hoa Khiem Temple.

At the bottom of the stairway, the path continues along the shore of the lake to the Honour Courtyard. Across the lake are the tombs of Tu Duc's adopted son, Emperor Kien Phuc, who ruled for only seven months (1883–84), and Empress Hoang Le Thien Anh. After walking between the honour guard of elephants, horses and diminutive mandarins (they were made even shorter than the emperor), you reach the Stele Pavilion, which shelters a stone tablet weighing about 20 tonnes. It took four years to transport the stele, the largest in Vietnam, 500km from near Thanh Hoa in the north. Tu Duc drafted the inscriptions himself in order to clarify certain aspects of his reign. He freely admitted that he had made mistakes and chose to name his tomb Khiem, which means 'modest'. The two nearby towers symbolise the emperor's power.

Tu Duc's tomb, enclosed by a wall, is on the other side of a half-moon-shaped lake. He was never actually interred here. The site where his remains were buried (along with great treasure) is not known. Because of the danger of grave robbers, extreme measures were taken to keep the location secret – every one of the 200 servants who buried the king was beheaded.

Tu Duc's tomb is about 5km south of Huế on Van Nien Hill in Duong Xuan Thuong Village.

TOMB OF DONG KHANH

The smallest of the Royal Tombs, **Dong Khanh's mausoleum** (admission 30,000d) was built in 1889. Emperor Dong Khanh was the nephew and adopted son of Tu Duc, and was placed on the throne by the French after they captured his predecessor, Ham Nghi. Predictably, Dong Khanh proved docile; he ruled from 1885 until his death three years later.

Seldom visited, there is a certain serenity here. It is just over 5km from the city, 500m behind the tomb of Tu Duc.

TOMB OF THIEU TRI

Construction of the **tomb of Thieu Tri** (admission 22,000d), who ruled from 1841 to 1847, was completed in 1848. It is the only Royal Tomb not enclosed by a wall. The tomb has a similar floor plan to his father Minh Mang's tomb but is substantially smaller.

During his lifetime, an effort to preserve Vietnamese independence by cracking down on missionaries resulted in a French naval attack in 1847, where Vietnam's coastal forts were destroyed and three junks sunk. The emperor's response was to decree that all Christians be summarily executed. The orders were never followed and Thieu Tri died shortly afterwards.

The tomb is about 7km from Huế, in a peaceful rural landscape, and is off the tour-bus trail. If you're walking, cycling or on a motorbike, there's a pretty 2km or so cross-country track that leads here from the tomb of Dong Khanh.

TOMB OF KHAI DINH

The hillside **tomb of Khai Dinh** (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1916 to 1925, is perhaps symptomatic of the decline of Vietnamese culture during the colonial era. Begun in 1920 and completed in 1931, the grandiose concrete structure is completely unlike Huế's other tombs, being a synthesis of Vietnamese and European elements. Even the stone faces of the mandarin honour guards are endowed with a mixture of Vietnamese and European features.

After climbing 36 steps between four dragon banisters, you reach the first courtyard, flanked by two pavilions. The Honour Courtyard, with its rows of elephants, horses

REGAL RESTING PLACES

Although all are unique in structure and design, most of the mausoleums consist of five parts:

- A stele pavilion in which the accomplishments, exploits and virtues of the deceased emperor are engraved on a marble tablet, usually written by the dead ruler's successor.
- A temple for the worship of the emperor and empress. In front of each altar, on which the deceased ruler's funerary tablets were placed, is an ornate dais that once held items the emperor used every day, such as his betel-nut trays and cigarette cases.
- A sepulchre, usually inside a square or circular enclosure, where the emperor's remains are buried.
- An honour courtyard paved with dark-brown *bat trang* bricks, along the sides of which stand stone elephants, horses, and civil and military mandarins. The civil mandarins wear square hats and hold an ivory sceptre, the symbol of their authority; the military mandarins wear round hats and hold swords.
- A lotus pond surrounded by frangipani and pine trees.

Almost all of the tombs, which are in walled compounds, were planned by the Nguyen emperors during their lifetimes. Many of the precious ornaments that were once reposed in the tombs disappeared during Vietnam's wars.

and mandarins, is 26 steps further up the hillside. In the centre of the courtyard is an octagonal Stele Pavilion.

Up three more flights of stairs is the main building, Thien Dinh, which is divided into three halls. The walls and ceiling are decorated with murals of the Four Seasons, Eight Precious Objects and Eight Fairies. Under a graceless, one-tonne concrete canopy is a gilt bronze statue of Khai Dinh in regalia. His remains are interred 18m below the statue and he is worshipped in the last hall.

The tomb of Khai Dinh is 10km from Huế, in Chau Chu Village.

TOMB OF MINH MANG

Perhaps the most majestic of all of the Royal Tombs is that of **Minh Mang** (admission 55,000d), who ruled from 1820 to 1840. Renowned for its architecture, which harmoniously blends into the natural surroundings, the tomb was planned during Minh Mang's lifetime and built between 1841 and 1843 by his successor.

The Honour Courtyard is reached via three gates on the eastern side of the wall. Three granite staircases lead from the courtyard to the square Stele Pavilion (Dinh Vuong). Nearby there once stood an altar on which buffaloes, horses and pigs were sacrificed.

Sung An Temple, dedicated to Minh Mang and his empress, is reached via three terraces and Hien Duc Gate. On the other side of the temple, three stone bridges span Trung Minh Ho (Lake of Impeccable Clarity). The central bridge, Cau Trung Dao, constructed of marble, was for the emperor's use only. Minh Lau Pavilion stands on the top of three superimposed terraces that represent the 'three powers': the heavens, the earth and water. Visible to the left is the Fresh Air Pavilion; the Angling Pavilion is to the right.

From a stone bridge across crescent-shaped Tan Nguyet Lake (Lake of the New Moon), a monumental staircase with dragon banisters leads to the sepulchre, which is surrounded by a circular wall symbolising the sun. Behind the bronze door in the middle of the enclosure is the emperor's burial place: a mound of earth covered with mature pine trees and dense shrubbery.

The tomb of Minh Mang, which is on Cam Ke Hill in An Bang Village, is over the bridge on the west bank of the Perfume River, about 12km from Huế.

TOMB OF GIA LONG

Emperor Gia Long, who founded the Nguyen dynasty in 1802 and ruled until 1819, ordered the construction of his tomb in 1814. According to royal annals, the emperor himself chose the site after scouting the area on the back of an elephant. The rarely visited **tomb** (admission free), which is presently in a state of ruin, is around 14km south of Huế and 3km from the west bank of the Perfume River.

Temple of Nam Giao

The **Temple of Nam Giao** (Temple of Heaven; admission free) was once the most important religious site in all of Vietnam. It was here that, every three years, the emperor solemnly offered elaborate sacrifices to the All-Highest Emperor of the August Heaven (Thuong De). The topmost esplanade, which represents heaven, is round, while the middle terrace, representing earth, is square, as is the lowest terrace representing humanity.

After reunification, the provincial government erected an obelisk in memory of soldiers killed in the American War on the site where the sacrificial altar had once stood. There was strong public sentiment in Huế against the obelisk and it was finally torn down in 1993. Nam Giao remains unrestored and crumbling.

To find it, head south on Đ Dien Bien Phu for nearly 2km after the railway tracks.

Thanh Toan Bridge

Situated 7km east of central Huế, the Thanh Toan Bridge is a classic covered Japanese footbridge. Architecturally similar to its cousin in Hoi An, it receives far fewer visitors – it's mostly used by local villagers for naps in the shady walkway.

The bridge is best reached by motorbike or bicycle. Finding it is a bit tricky, but tolerable if you consider getting lost part of the excursion. Head north for a few hundred metres on Đ Ba Trieu until you see a sign to the Citadel Hotel. Turn right here and follow the bumpy dirt road for another 6km past villages, rice paddies and several pagodas until you reach the bridge.

Duong No Village

The peaceful village of Duong No makes for a refreshing trip from Huế. The main attraction here is the well-preserved, modest and beautiful **Ho Chi Minh's House** (Nha Bac Ho; admis-

sion free), where Uncle Ho lived from 1898 to 1900. Walk a few metres further along the riverbank to **Ben Da**, the steps down to the water where Ho bathed. Another 300m or so beyond them, over a quaint bridge, is an **Am Ba** ('female spirit' temple). It's in some disrepair, but it's quiet and contemplative, with ceramic mosaic work decorating the walls.

Duong No, 6km northeast of Huế, can easily be reached by bicycle or motorbike. Look for a small wooden sign on the left at a bridge off the main road; cross over the bridge and turn immediately right. Ho Chi Minh's House is a few hundred metres along the riverbank. A loop can be made by following the path beside the house to a road at the end; turn left and continue through a pretty rural village for a couple of kilometres. Turn left again, and the road rejoins the bridge to the main road.

Thuan An to Vinh Hien

Thuan An Beach, 15km northeast of Huế, is on a splendid lagoon near the mouth of the Perfume River, at the tip of a long, thin island. It's lovely for beachcombing, and is quite undeveloped except for a few kiosks, but between September and April the water's often too rough to swim in.

It is joined to the mainland by a short bridge, and beyond the beach a 50km scenic road (actually Hwy 49, though you'd never guess) stretches the length of the undeveloped island (no maps give it a name) from Thuan An to Vinh Hien. This makes a great day trip by motorbike or car from Huế. It also offers an alternative route to or from Huế for travellers making their way on two wheels along the coast road.

Coming from Thuan An, the island is skinny and the road winds along with the lagoon on one side and the ocean on the other. There are several villages on the way with stacks of enormous *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) jars lining the outer walls of many houses, and miles of fertile raised vegetable gardens. But most extraordinary are the vast, colourful and opulent graves and family temples lining the ocean side of the road; there are thousands upon thousands of them. In Vietnam the area is known as the 'city of tombs', with families vying to outdo their neighbours' ancestral monuments. There was a huge outflow of boat people from this area and the overseas Vietnamese now provide the funds to construct these excessive structures.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are at least three options for driving this road: two for day-trippers from Huế, and one for through travellers.

Those on day trips can just drive as far as they like and then return to Thuan An. An alternative is to drive to Vinh Tanh and, about halfway along the road, turn right and head to a wharf where a ferry runs back and forth across the lagoon until about 4pm. The 20-minute crossing costs 5000d for motorbikes and 30,000d for cars, and moors 13km from Hwy 1A, a little south of Phu Bai Airport.

An option for through travellers continuing south after visiting Hue – on motorbikes and bicycles only – is to make your way to Vinh Hien and, from there, catch a public boat to Cau Hai on the mainland, close to the Bach Ma National Park access road. The cost for two people and a motorbike is 5000d, and the journey takes an hour or so. Be aware that weather conditions affect the running of the boats, so be prepared to backtrack if necessary.

BACH MA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 054 / elevation 1450m

A French-era hill station, **Bach Ma National Park** (Vuon Quoc Gia Bach Ma; ☎ 871 330; www.bachma.vnn.vn; adult 10,500d/child 5500d/child under 5 free) reaches a peak of 1450m at Bach Ma mountain, only 18km from the coast. The cooler climate attracted the French, who started building villas here in 1930; by 1937 the number of holiday homes had reached 139 and it became known as the 'Dalat of central Vietnam'. Most of the visitors were high-ranking French VIPs. Not surprisingly the Viet Minh tried hard to spoil the holiday – the area saw some heavy fighting in the early 1950s. After independence from the French, Bach Ma was soon forgotten and the villas abandoned; today they are in total ruin and only a few stone walls remain.

Bach Ma has some stunning views across the coastline near Hai Van Pass, which the Americans used to their advantage: during the war, US troops turned the area into a fortified bunker. The VC did their best to harass the Americans, but couldn't dislodge them. Between the eerie remains and memories of the American War, spooky stories abound among locals, who maintain that the park is a realm of ghosts.

In 1991, 22,031 hectares of land were set aside as a nature preserve and designated Bach

Ma National Park. Efforts are now fast under way to regenerate patches of forest that were destroyed by clear-felling and defoliation during the American War.

Forty-three species of mammal have been definitively recorded within the boundaries of the park, with a further 76 species, including tigers and leopards, potentially present. A recent victory in the wildlife stakes came with the discovery in 1992 of evidence of *sao la*, a previously unknown antelope-like creature whose footprints and horns were found. Two other animals were discovered in the late 1990s: the deer-like Truong Son muntjac and the giant muntjac. With enforced protection from poachers, there is hope that wild elephants, now restricted to the Lao side of the border, will return to seek the sanctuary of Bach Ma.

As most of the park's resident mammals are nocturnal, sightings demand a great deal of effort and patience. Bird-watching is fantastic here, but you need to be up at dawn to get the best sightings. Of the 800-odd species of bird known to inhabit Vietnam, the park is home to some 330, including the fabulous crested argus pheasant and the tenacious Edwards' pheasant – unseen and thought to be extinct for 50 years, it was recently discovered in the park's buffer zone.

More than 1400 species of plant have been discovered here, representing a fifth of the flora of Vietnam. Among these, at least 430 species are medicinal plants, 33 produce essential oils, 26 are used for weaving and 22 bear edible fruit.

It was not until March 1998 that Bach Ma National Park began receiving visitors. Despite its tender age, the efforts of the park's staff are laudable and they are hard at work protecting the area, working on community development with the ethnic minorities in the area and promoting sustainable ecotourism. Several young rangers here speak English well and there is an interesting display in the **Visitor Centre**, located at the park entrance. As well as plenty of natural-history information, there's a huge crate of confiscated hunting tools, weaponry and the remains of a crashed helicopter. From here you can book village and bird-watching tours, English or French-speaking guides (150,000d per day), and Russian jeeps (one way/return 200,000/300,000d) or 12-seater minibuses (one way/return 250,000/400,000d) to take you to the summit. Motorcycles and bikes are strictly prohibited.

Bach Ma is the wettest place in Vietnam, with the heaviest of the rain falling in October and November. With the wet weather come plenty of leeches. Still, even these months are not out of the question for visiting. The best time to visit Bach Ma is from February to September, particularly between March and June, for what's likely to be the best weather.

Sleeping & Eating

National Park Guesthouse (☎/fax 871 330; camp sites per person 3000d, 6-person tents 80,000d, entrance r 100,000-120,000d, summit dm 120,000d, r 150,000-300,000d) The park authority has a small camping ground and four guesthouses near the summit and two more guesthouses near the entrance. One of the summit guesthouses has a 12-person dorm with a shared bathroom. The more expensive twin-bed rooms are a better bet for views and facilities. This is a prime spot, rebuilt from the ruins of Emperor Bao Dai's summer retreat. Bookings should be made at the Visitor Centre. Give at least four hours' notice for meal requirements, as fresh food is brought up to the park from the market on demand.

Several private companies have recently built low-key accommodation in the park, under the watchful eye of the park authorities. Near the summit trail, **Morin-Bach Ma Hotel** (☎ 871 199; www.huonggiangtourist.com/huonggiangtourist/hotel/Bachma_Hotel.htm; s/d US\$25/30), built in a French style, offers some smart rooms with balconies.

Getting There & Away

Bach Ma is 28km west of Lang Co and 40km southeast of Huế. The turn-off is signposted in the town of Cau Hai on Hwy 1A. The entrance is 3km along the narrow road into the park.

It's another steep and meandering 16km on the sealed road from the gate to the summit and, unless you have your own vehicle or are willing to walk, you'll need to hire private transport from the Visitor Centre. Walking takes about three to four hours down, so carry plenty of water and wear a hat, as there is little canopy protection on the lower part of the road.

There are buses to the park from Danang (US\$3, two hours) and Huế (US\$2, one hour). Local buses stop at Cau Hai, where *xem* drivers can ferry you to the entrance. Cau Hai also has a **train station** (☎ 871 362; Loc Dien village), but the one daily service in either direction is slow and arrives/departs at antisocial times.

Getting Around

Your visit will be much easier if you can hire a vehicle for your time in the park, especially if you plan to walk some of the trails, as they are spread along the 16km summit-access road.

SUOI VOI (ELEPHANT SPRINGS)

About 15km north of Lang Co Beach, **Suoi Voi** (admission 10,000d, plus per car 10,000/per motorbike 2000d) is a secluded recreation area, where you can easily spend a half-day traipsing through the forest and swimming in cool, crystal-clear streams. It's a pleasant detour and is recommended for motorbikers and cyclists who are braving their way along Hwy 1A.

The main springs are a short walk from the parking area. The natural pool is ringed by huge boulders – one vaguely in the shape of an elephant's head, and cosmetically enhanced to look more like it. The stream turns into a hydro-slide over the smooth rocks. Further exploration will lead to less-populated swimming holes, including the **Vung Do Pool**, about 200m beyond the main area.

Foreign visitors here are scarce and on weekdays you may have the whole place to yourself. Weekends, however, are jam-packed with Vietnamese, notably young couples exploring the birds and bees.

To reach the springs from Hwy 1A, turn inland at the road marker reading 'Danang

52km' (if coming from the north) or 'Phu Bai 44km' (if heading from the south). You will see the 19th-century Thua Lau Church just ahead of you. Keep the church on your left and follow the dirt road for 5km to the entry gate. Buy a ticket here and hold onto it as you may be asked to show it more than once. From here it's a bumpy 1.5km to the parking area. Along the way you'll pass basic bungalows (no hot water) for rent at **Hoa Thin 1** (☎ 054-891 805; r 150,000d). One suspects they're often used for, ahem, short-term stays on the weekends.

There are some simple food stalls near the springs, but it's better to bring a picnic.

LANG CO BEACH

☎ 054

Lang Co is an attractive, island-like stretch of palm-shaded white sand, with a crystal-clear, turquoise lagoon on one side and 10 kilometres of beachfront on the other. Unfortunately the beach and the edges of the lagoon can turn into litter traps. Many open-tour buses make a lunch stop here and it makes a fine place to hop off for a night or two, depending on the weather.

The beach is best enjoyed between April and July. From late August till November rains are frequent, and from December to March it can get chilly. Lang Co was devastated by a

WALKING TRAILS IN BACH MA NATIONAL PARK

These trails and others are described more fully in the national park's map, which you get with your ticket; further information is found in the *Bach Ma National Park* booklet, available for 12,000d at the park entrance. Check with the rangers for the current condition of each track.

- **Pheasant Trail** is named after the rare and beautiful crested argus pheasant, but you're more likely to hear the birds calling than see them. The 2.5km track starts 5km along the summit-access road, and leads through forest to a series of waterfalls and pools. You can cool off here before the return hike.
- **Five Lakes Cascade Trail** starts 1km beyond the national-park guesthouse. A 2km walk takes you through forest and follows a series of cascades. The cold water is home to a recently discovered species of frog.
- **Rhododendron Trail** can be walked as an extension of the Five Lakes Cascade Trail, or can be reached by a separate track from Km16 on the summit-access road. February and March are the best months to walk this trail, when the rhododendrons are in bloom. At the end of the trail is a spectacular waterfall, and you can get to the bottom if you're prepared to climb back up the 650 steps. The water eventually makes its way down to join up with the Perfume River in Huế.
- **Summit Trail** is a steep but short 500m walk to Hai Vong Dai, the 1450m summit of Bach Ma. Today visitors simply enjoy the stunning views, but in 1968 a helicopter base was maintained at this strategic spot. The streams of cloud (*bach ma*) often seen at the summit are thought to resemble the mane of a white horse, inspiring the park's name.

major typhoon in late 2006, but within a few weeks all of the resorts had reopened and rebuilding was well underway.

There are spectacular views of Lang Co from the Hai Van Pass and from the trains linking Danang and Huế. Most of the accommodation is north of the town along the highway.

Sleeping & Eating

Lang Co Hotel (☎ 874 426; codolangco@dng.vnn.vn; r US\$15-20, bungalow US\$35; ♿) This beachside pad offers the choice of bungalows set in a shaded garden compound or a block of big, well-priced rooms, although the cheapest don't have hot water.

Thank Tam Seaside Resort (☎ 874 456; fax 873 762; r 350,000d; ♿) Situated about 1km north of Lang Co Hotel is this collection of beachside bungalows. The terrace restaurant has great views and is a popular seafood stop for tourists making the journey between Huế and Danang.

Lang Co Beach Resort (☎ 873 555; www.langcobeachresort.com.vn; r US\$60-70; ♿) Set amid lavishly landscaped gardens, this is the most upmarket option in Lang Co. Rooms have nice linen, and facilities include a large pool, fitness centre and wireless internet in the attractive Chinese-style reception.

New guesthouses have sprung up on the lagoon side of the road, only a short stroll to the beach. Opposite Lang Co Beach Resort, **Chi Na Guesthouse** (☎ 874 597; r US\$10; ♿) offers cheap rooms, and the friendly family speak some English.

Getting There & Away

Lang Co is just on the other side of the new Hai Van Tunnel from Danang, which has reduced the distance to 20km. Tourist buses pass through daily, en route for Huế, Danang and Hoi An, with all tickets costing just US\$2. However, those on two wheels will still need to take the 35km scenic route over the Hai Van Pass.

Lang Co **train station** (☎ 874 423) is 3km from the beach, towards the lagoon. Finding someone to take you by motorbike from the train station to the beach shouldn't be difficult. The train journey from here to Danang (13,000d, 1½ to two hours, four daily) is one of the most spectacular in Vietnam. Services also head to and from Huế (24,000d, 1½ hours, two daily).

HAI VAN PASS & TUNNEL

The Hai Van (Sea Cloud) Pass crosses over a spur of the Truong Son Mountain Range that juts into the sea. About 30km north of Danang, the road climbs to an elevation of 496m, passing south of the Ai Van Son peak (1172m). It's an incredibly mountainous stretch of highway with spectacular views. The railway track, with its many tunnels, goes around the peninsula, following the beautiful and deserted shoreline to avoid the hills.

In the 15th century this pass formed the boundary between Vietnam and the Kingdom of Champa. Until the American War it was heavily forested. At the summit is a bullet-scarred French fort, later used as a bunker by the South Vietnamese and US armies, with incredible views over Lang Co.

If you cross in winter, the pass serves as something of a visible dividing line between the climates of the north and south. Acting as a virtual wall, it protects Danang from the fierce 'Chinese winds' that sweep in from the northeast. From about November to March the exposed Lang Co side of the pass can be uncomfortably wet and chilly, while just to the south it's warm and dry. When the winter weather is lousy in Huế, it is usually good in Danang.

At the top of the pass you'll have to fight off a rather large crowd of very persistent vendors. You would be wise not to change money with anyone here, as you're more than likely to get short-changed.

In 2005 the 6280m-long Hai Van Tunnel opened, using Austrian technology, bypassing the Pass and shaving an hour off the journey between Danang and Huế. Motorcycles and bikes are not permitted in the tunnel, but most cars and buses now take this route. The diversion of this traffic from the Pass road has made it a much safer and more enjoyable route, although you may still find yourself playing chicken with a suicidal truck driver.

BA NA HILL STATION

☎ 0511 / elevation 1485m

It's easy to see why the French would run to the hills at the first opportunity, and why the Vietnamese were less keen. As you climb the winding road to beautiful **Ba Na** (admission 10,000d, per motorbike/car 5000/10,000d) you can feel the temperature and humidity dropping away. When it's 36°C on the coast, it's likely to be between 15°C and 26°C up the mountain.

Rain often falls in the section between 700m and 1200m above sea level, but around the hill station itself, the sky is usually clear, the view is truly spectacular, and the air is fresh and cool. Mountain tracks lead to a variety of waterfalls and viewpoints.

Founded in 1919, of the 200-odd villas that originally stood, a few tattered, atmospheric ruins remain. Until WWII the French were carried up the last 20km of rough mountain road by sedan chair.

Near the top, the **Linh Ung Pagoda** (1999) is a supremely peaceful spot, with a 24m-high white seated Buddha visible for miles around. Near the pagoda a **cable car** (return ticket 35,000d) whisks visitors up to the hill station. The vistas are huge.

The provincial government has high hopes of once again making Ba Na a magnet for tourists – branding it 'the Dalat of Danang province' and developing the site to suit domestic visitors. This has led to a variety of accommodation and restaurants, but also lots of karaoke, a loud PA and litter.

There are no ATMs up here, but there is a small **post office** (☎ 791 500) near Le Nim restaurant.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Nim (☎ 791 504; r 200,000-400,000d) For sweeping views look no further than Le Nim, situated near the top of the cable car. Many of the rooms have beautiful wood panelling and there are a number of freestanding stone bungalows. The restaurant serves up terrific fresh seafood dishes.

Ba Na By Night Resort (☎ 791 056; bananight@dng.vnn.vn; r 200,000-500,000d) This has probably the best choice of rooms at Ba Na, set in *rong* houses (thatched-roof houses on stilts) or various villas, but you miss out on the views. Facilities include a popular bar and tennis courts. The remnants of a colonial-era wine cellar and French villa are interesting to check out, and from here it's an easy walk down the stairs to the giant Buddha of Linh Ung Pagoda and the bottom of the cable car.

Getting There & Away

Ba Na is 42km west of Danang along a beautiful winding road that can be dangerous on a foggy day. Pay the admission fee at the Reception Centre at the bottom of the access road. From here it's a steep climb uphill, and many motorbikes won't attempt it. Shuttle

buses, leaving when full, take passengers up the mountain for 20,000d (30,000d return). Otherwise you can hire a Ba Na local with a high-powered motorcycle for the trip (60,000d).

SUOI MO

A short detour on the way to Ba Na, the waterfall at **Suoi Mo** (Dream Springs, admission 3000d) has some clear swimming holes for a dip. It's a pretty, undeveloped spot, if you can ignore the litter; go on a weekday to avoid the crowds.

Suoi Mo is clearly signposted from the road to Ba Na. Continue up the bumpy track for 2km or so and look for a small arrowed sign on the left. Park here and walk along the track that leads off to the right beside a few houses. A 20-minute climb (slippery when wet) brings you to a waterfall.

DANANG

☎ 0511 / pop 781,000

While most tourists neglect Vietnam's fourth-largest city in favour of nearby Huế and Hoi An, Danang has considerable charm in its own right. The economic powerhouse of central Vietnam, it combines the buzz of a bigger city with beautiful beaches and great restaurants. A lot of money has recently been poured into tree-lined boulevards, bridges and beachside resorts.

Back in the heady days of the American War, Danang was referred to as the 'Saigon of the North'. This held a note of both praise and condemnation: like its big southern sister, Danang was notable for its booming economy, fine restaurants, busy traffic and glittering shops. Entertaining the soldiers from the nearby American base was a profitable business – bars and prostitution were major industries, and that sleazy legacy lingers. Men travelling together or alone may find themselves (or more accurately, their wallets) subjected to unwanted attention in even the ritziest of bars.

Danang marks the northern limits of Vietnam's tropical zone and boasts a pleasant climate all year round.

History

Known during French colonial rule as Tourane, Danang succeeded Hoi An as the most important port in central Vietnam during the 19th century, and it remains the principal one for central Vietnam.

images of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu – are exquisitely detailed. Allow yourself at least a good hour to soak it up.

The museum's artefacts, which date from the 7th to 15th centuries, were discovered at Dong Duong (Indrapura), Khuong My, My Son (see p262), Tra Kieu (see p266) and other sites, mostly in Quang Nam and Danang provinces. The museum's rooms are named after the localities in which the objects displayed were found.

A trilingual (Vietnamese, English and French) guidebook about the museum, *Museum of Cham Sculpture – Danang*, was written by its director, Tran Ky Phuong, who is Vietnam's most eminent scholar of Cham civilisation. The book provides excellent background on the art of Champa and details on the museum's exhibits. It's usually on sale at the entrance.

Guides (some better than others) wait at the entrance of the museum to offer their services, but agree on a price before you begin.

HO CHI MINH MUSEUM

There are three sections to the **Ho Chi Minh Museum** (Map p236; ☎ 615 982; 3 Đ Nguyen Van Troi; admission free; ☎ 7-11am & 1.30-4.30pm) – a museum of military history in front of which US, Soviet and Chinese weaponry is displayed; a replica of Ho Chi Minh's house in Hanoi (complete with a small lake); and, across the pond from the house, a museum solely about Uncle Ho.

It's easy to tire of Vietnam's numerous military and Ho Chi Minh museums. This one isn't bad, but don't bother if you're visiting the larger incarnations in Hanoi or HCMC. The museum is 250m west of Đ Nui Thanh.

DANANG WATERPARK

The enormous **water park** (Map p236; adult/child 40,000/30,000d; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm Wed-Mon) is lots of fun – and not just for kids – with slides, pools and the like. It's on the riverbank, 2km beyond the Ho Chi Minh Museum.

DANANG CATHEDRAL

Known to locals as Con Ga Church (Rooster Church) because of the weathercock on top of the steeple, the candy-pink **Danang Cathedral** (Map p230; Đ Tran Phu) was built for the city's French residents in 1923. Today it serves a Catholic community of 4000 – it's standing room only if you arrive late for Mass.

Mass is usually held from Monday to Saturday at 5am and 5.30pm, and on Sunday at 5am, 6.15am, 7.30am, 3.30pm and 5pm.

CAO DAI TEMPLE

Built in 1956, **Cao Dai Temple** (Map p230; 63 Đ Haiphong) is the largest such structure outside the sect's headquarters in Tay Ninh (p381). There are 50,000 Cao Dai faithful in Quang Nam and Danang provinces – 20,000 in Danang itself. As with all Cao Dai temples, prayers are held four times a day: at 6am, noon, 6pm and midnight.

The left-hand gate to the complex is for women; the right-hand gate for men. The doors to the sanctuary are similarly segregated, although priests of either gender use the central door. Behind the main altar sits an enormous globe with the Cao Dai 'divine eye' symbol on it.

A sign reading *van giao nhât ly* (All religions have the same reason) hangs from the ceiling in front of the altar. Behind the gilded letters is a picture of the founders of five of the world's great religions. From left to right are Mohammed, Laotse (wearing Eastern Orthodox robes), Jesus (portrayed as he is in French icons), a Southeast Asian-looking Buddha and Confucius (looking as Chinese as could be).

Portraits of early Cao Dai leaders, dressed in turbans and white robes, are displayed in the building behind the main sanctuary. Ngo Van Chieu, the founder of Cao Daim, is shown standing, wearing a pointed white turban and a long white robe with blue markings.

PAGODAS

Built in 1936, **Phap Lam Pagoda** (Map p230; ☎ 823 870; 574 Đ Ong Ich Khiem) has in its grounds a brass statue of Dia Tang (the King of Hell), a large yellow Happy Buddha and a giant pink Buddha with a swastika (a common Buddhist symbol) on his chest. A massive new pagoda was being built here at the time of research.

Pho Da Nang Pagoda (Map p230; ☎ 826 094; 340 Đ Phan Chu Trinh) was built in 1923 in a traditional architectural configuration. Local people participate actively in the pagoda's lively religious life.

Sleeping

Compared with the bargains to be found in Hoi An and Huế, rooms are expensive – Danang is more used to catering to business-people than tourists. However, the explosion

of hotel construction does hold the promise of falling prices in the future. For information on accommodation just across the river at My Khe Beach, see p238.

BUDGET

Minh Travel Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 812 661; mtjraymond@yahoo.ca; 105 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$3-9; ☎) This tiny place is developing a reputation among super-budget travellers for the friendliness and honesty of its owners and its rock-bottom prices. The cheapest rooms are like prison cells (no air-con and a basic shared bathroom), but the others offer more creature comforts.

Hoa Sen Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 829 000; fax 829 001; 119-123 Đ Hung Vuong; r 200,000d; ☎) Close to the train station, this is a tidy budget option, although some rooms are windowless and dark. They're brightened somewhat by large silk flowers.

Phu An Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 825 708; phuan.hotel.vn@gmail.com; 29 Đ Nguyen Van Linh; r US\$13-15; ☎) Apart from some bad air-brushed portraits, this spotless new hotel on a busy street is a tasteful and comfortable option.

Bao Ngoc Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 817 711; baongoc.hotel@dng.vnn.vn; 48 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; r US\$15-16; ☎) With an inexplicable kiwi logo and excessively floral sheets, this inner-city hotel offers good-value clean rooms.

Hoa Viet Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 840 111; fax 840 242; 8 Đ Phan Dinh Phung; r US\$16-17; ☎) This well-priced new joint near the river has attractive, clean rooms.

MIDRANGE

Binh Duong (Map p230; ☎ 821 930; fax 827 666; 32-34 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$15-25; ☎) Popular with longer-term stayers, the friendly staff at Binh Duong speak excellent English and some of the ample rooms have large corner bathtubs.

our pick Dai A Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 827 532; www.daiahotel.com; 51 Đ Yen Bay; r US\$15-30; ☎) The large Jesus painting and papal crown light fixture in the reception leave no doubt as to the religious affiliation of this establishment, close to the Catholic cathedral. The well-appointed rooms have free internet access, the staff are extremely helpful and there are some lovely views from the higher floors.

Bamboo Green Harbourside (Map p230; ☎ 822 722; bamboogreen2@dng.vnn.vn; 177 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$25-30; ste US\$40; ☎) In a good location opposite Danang Cathedral and near the river, many of the rooms have good views and breakfast is included in the prices.

Bamboo Green Riverside Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 832 591; www.vitours.com.vn; 68 Đ Bach Dang; r US\$30-50; ☎) Even the cheaper rooms have views, bathtubs and silk robes in this impressive place conveniently situated right by the Song Han Bridge.

Elegant Hotel (Map p230; ☎ 892 893; elegant@dng.vnn.vn; 22A Đ Bach Dang; s US\$25-60, d US\$30-65; ☎) While the outside is less elegant than it once was, this riverside hotel has well-maintained, bright rooms and free wi-fi.

Eating

VIETNAMESE

Com Chay Chua Tinh Hoi (Map p230; 574 Đ Ong Ich Khiem; dishes from 3000d) Known for the best vegetarian food in town; it's just inside the entrance gate to the Phap Lam Pagoda.

Com Nieu (Map p230; K254/2 Đ Hoang Dieu; dishes 10,000-40,000d) A local favourite tucked away off a lane, this is the place to try the local speciality *hoanh thanh* – a wonton-like combination of minced pork and shrimp served fried or steamed.

Au Lac (Map p230; ☎ 611 074; 4-6 Đ 2/9; dishes 25,000-70,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) This stylish restaurant serving tasty Vietnamese dishes has an impressive outdoor dining area and a colourful bar.

our pick Apsara (Map p230; ☎ 561 409; www.apsara-danang.com; 222 Đ Tran Phu; meals US\$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best dining experience in Danang, Apsara has excellent food, great service, a good wine list and an atmospheric setting – with Cham-influenced décor and live traditional music. The cuisine flirts with Japanese and Chinese, but is mainly Vietnamese, with an emphasis on seafood.

INTERNATIONAL

Bread of Life (Map p230; ☎ 893 456; 215 Đ Tran Phu; cakes/breakfast 10,000/20,000d; ☎ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) A great spot for a Western-style breakfast or a coffee and cake, this little café employs deaf staff and gives a percentage of profits to charity. They also screen movies in English every Wednesday.

Torino (Map p230; ☎ 565 124; 283 Đ Nguyen Chi Thanh; mains 40,000-90,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This new authentically Italian restaurant serves excellent pasta, pizza and proper espresso, as well as more exotic dishes such as frogs and crocodile. The windowless dining room takes on a better vibe at night when it doubles as a jazz club.

Hana Kim Dinh Restaurant (Map p230; ☎ 830 024; 15 Đ Bach Dang; meals 90,000d; 🍴) Well located right on the river, this restaurant serves an interesting mix of Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean dishes, along with pizza and pasta.

Phi Lu Chinese Restaurant (Map p236; ☎ 611 888; 1-3 Đ 2/9; dishes 30,000-350,000d) A popular Chinese restaurant with three branches in Danang, this one has the most character – festooned with red lanterns at night. The food is excellent.

Drinking & Entertainment

Christie's Cool Spot (Map p230; ☎ 824 040; 112 Đ Tran Phu) The downstairs bar is the place to meet US war veterans and join their debates about whether the Iraq war was even more or less pointless than Vietnam. What brings them back to Vietnam? Without taking a scientific survey, the answer seems to be the women. Christie's also serves Western comfort food, including pizza and roast chicken.

Tea Café Cung Dinh (Map p230; ☎ 562 990; 112 Đ Yen Bay) It's amazing what a little mood lighting can do. This garden café set in a dreary car park becomes a fairyland at night, lit by red Chinese lanterns. It serves a range of exotic teas and delicious cakes.

Truc Ha 2 (Map p230; ☎ 562 498; K121/3 Đ Hoang Van Thu) This lush garden café hidden off a inner city laneway is an oasis of calm during the day – less so at night when the karaoke starts up.

Camel Club (Map p230; ☎ 887 462; 16 Đ Ly Thuong Kiet; admission 20,000d; 🍸 7pm-1am) This is where Danang's beautiful people come for pricy drinks (from 30,000d) and heavy beats.

Shopping

Han Market (Cho Han; Map p230; cnr Đ Hung Vuong & Đ Tran Phu; 🕒 6am-9pm) is a fine place for a casual stroll or to shop in the evenings. The **Con Market** (Cho Con; Map p230; Đ Ong Ich Khiem) is Danang's largest, but is mainly a daytime affair.

If you're looking for a shimmering framed Ho Chi Minh portrait with a clock inset, or a plastic dragon that lights up and sings Old McDonald, check out the collection of kitsch stores (Map p230) near the corner of Đ Hung Vuong and Đ Phan Chu Trinh.

Getting There & Away

AIR

During the American War, Danang had one of the busiest airports in the world. Now it settles for being the third busiest in Vietnam.

Pacific Airlines (Map p230; ☎ 583 583; 35 Đ Nguyen Van Linh) Daily flights from Danang to HCMC and Hanoi.

Vietnam Airlines (Map p230; ☎ 821 130; 35 Đ Tran Phu; 🕒 7-11am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.30-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Sat & Sun) Connects Danang with Hanoi, HCMC, Pleiku, Buon Ma Thuot, Cam Ranh (Nha Trang) and Quy Nhon.

BUS

The large **Danang intercity bus station** (Map p236; ☎ 821 265; 33 Đ Dien Bien Phu; 🕒 ticket office 7-11am & 1-5pm) is 3km west from the city centre. A metered taxi to the riverside will cost 50,000d.

Buses leave for all major centres, including Dong Hoi (56,000d, five hours, six daily), Huế (40,000d, three hours, six daily), Quy Nhon (65,000d, six hours, 11 daily) and Kon Tum (85,000d, five hours, three daily).

There are three weekly services to Savannakhet (240,000d, 14 hours), crossing the border at Lao Bao. Phone Nguyen Phuoc for bookings (☎ 0913-412 442).

Regular buses to Hoi An (8000d, one hour) depart from a local bus station 200m away from the intercity bus station. Foreigners tend to be overcharged, especially if you pick up the bus from street. Check the price before boarding and stand your ground.

With an advance booking, **Sinh Café** (☎ 0510-863 948) open-tour buses will pick up from outside the Cham museum twice a day en route to Huế (US\$3, 2½ hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

The simplest way to get to Hoi An (30km) is to hire a car for around US\$10 from a local travel agency (see p231), or a motorbike for around US\$4 to US\$6 from one of the guys on the street corners. For a slightly higher fee you can ask the driver to stop off and wait while you visit the Marble Mountains and China Beach.

You can also reach My Son by motorbike (US\$12) or car (US\$32), with the option of being dropped off in Hoi An on the way back.

Distances to major destinations from Danang include Hanoi (764km), Huế (108km) and HCMC (972km).

TRAIN

Danang's **train station** (☎ 823 810; 202 Đ Haiphong) is served by all *Reunification Express* trains, with stops including Huế (40,000d, 2½ to four hours, seven daily), Lang Co (13,000d, 1½ to two hours, four daily), Quang Ngai

(47,000d, 2½ to four hours, six daily), Tuy Hoa (153,000d, seven to 10 hours, five daily) and Nha Trang (203,000d, 8½ to 12½ hours, seven daily).

The train ride to Huế is one of the best in the country – it's worth taking as an excursion in itself.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Danang's airport is just 2km west of the city centre, close enough to reach by *xe om* in 10 minutes (around 10,000d). A metered taxi to the centre costs about 20,000d.

CYCLO & XE OM

Danang has plenty of motorbike taxis and *cyclo* drivers; take the usual caution and be prepared to bargain the fare. Trips around town shouldn't cost more than 10,000d to 15,000d. Be careful of *xe om* drivers at night offering to take you to bars/girls – you may find yourself heaved into parting with hundreds of dollars.

TAXI

Both **Airport Taxi** (☎ 27 27 27) and **VN Taxis** (☎ 52 52 52) provide modern vehicles with air-con and meters.

AROUND DANANG

Nam O Beach

Nam O Beach (Map p236) is on the Bay of Danang about 15km northwest of the city. The small local community supported itself for years by producing firecrackers. Since the ban on firecrackers by the government in 1995, the resourceful locals have recently gone into making *nuoc mam* instead – and while it's not as profitable as firecrackers, it's better than nothing.

There is another local speciality here called *goi ca*, which is fresh, raw fish fillets marinated in a special sauce and coated in a spicy powder – something like Vietnamese sushi.

At the time of research a massive new complex, Red Beach Resort, was being built at the city end of the beach.

Nui Son Tra (Monkey Mountain)

Jutting out into the sea like a giant pair of Mickey Mouse ears, the Son Tra peninsula is crowned by the mountain that the American soldiers called Monkey. Until recently Monkey had a military base on its back, but

gradually the military has been loosening its grip. An excellent new road winds around the southern edge and several resorts have sprung up – mainly catering to Vietnamese tourists (see below). The large foreigner-friendly Nui Son Tra resort on the isolated eastern side was under construction at the time of research, as was a major bridge linking Tien Sa Port (Cang Tien Sa) with the northern tip of Danang.

A memorial near Nui Song Tra's eastern edge commemorates an unfortunate episode of colonial history. Spanish-led Filipino and French troops attacked Danang in August 1858, ostensibly to end Emperor Tu Duc's mistreatment of Catholics. The city quickly fell, but the invaders had to contend with cholera, dysentery, scurvy, typhus and mysterious fevers. By the summer of 1859, the number of invaders who had died of illness was 20 times the number of those who had been killed in combat.

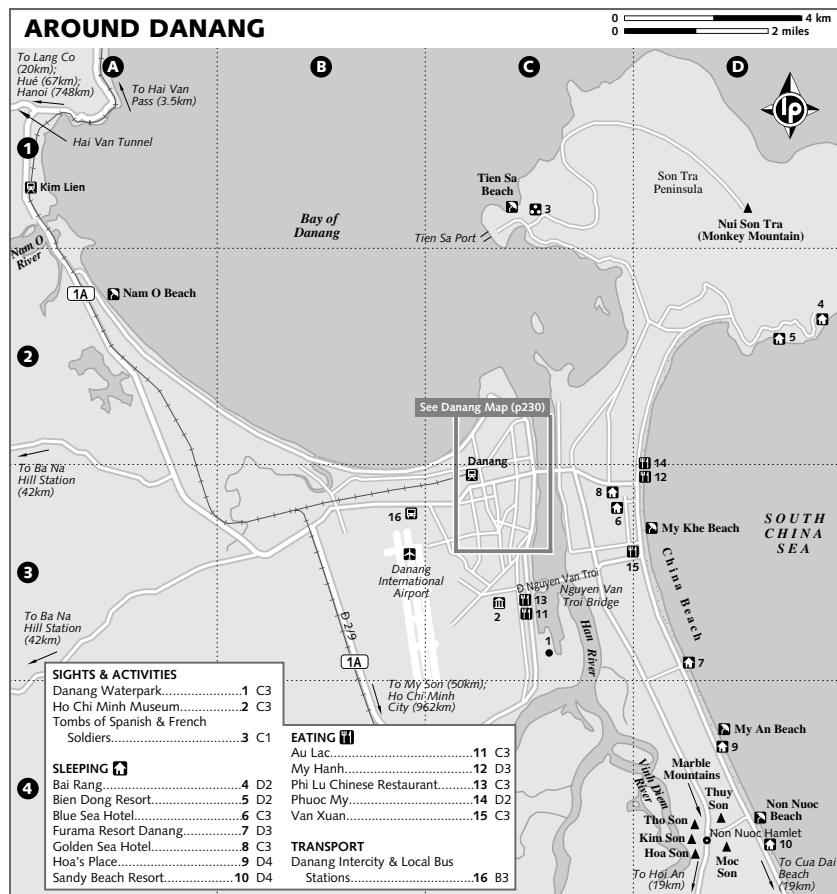
Many of the **tombs** (Map p236; admission free) of the Spanish and French soldiers are below a chapel near Tien Sa Port. The names of the dead are written on the walls. To get here, cross Song Han Bridge and turn left onto Đ Ngo Quyen, continuing north to the port. The ossuary, a small white building, stands on the right on a low hill, about 500m before the gate of the port and below the chapel.

The sheltered **Tien Sa Beach** (Map p236), behind the port and the chapel, is quiet and calm, with clear water. It's good for a swim if you can ignore the litter, and there are great views across to the Hai Van Pass.

SLEEPING & EATING

Bai Rang (Map p236; ☎ 0511-971 904; Son Tra; r 150,000d) This place will only appeal to a certain type of backpacker. Unquestionably the real deal, you'll be sleeping in a thatched roof shack where you may want to check the toilet for frogs before you use it. Take a sleeping mat if you choose to stay. There is a ramshackle restaurant and a boat on poles serving as a bar, all set in a placid bay.

Bien Dong Resort (Map p236; ☎ 0511-990 179; Son Tra; r 300,000d; 🍴 🍷) Wonderfully isolated, nobody speaks a word of English here. A number of tidy bungalows are dotted around the edge of the jungle. There are two swimming pools for those bored with the idyllic beach, as well as a restaurant and bar. Concrete deer guard the grounds.



Marble Mountains

A spectacular sight from the new China Beach coastal road, **Marble Mountains** (Map p236; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7am-5pm) consist of five craggy marble outcrops topped with delicate pagodas. Ironically, the sculptors based around the mountains now use marble shipped from China, as locals began to realise that at the rate they were using it, there wouldn't be any marble, or any mountains, left to entice visitors.

Each mountain is said to represent a natural element and is named accordingly: Thuy Son (Water), Moc Son (Wood), Hoa Son (Fire), Kim Son (Metal or Gold) and Tho Son (Earth). The largest and most famous, **Thuy Son**, has a number of natural caves in which

first Hindu, and later Buddhist, sanctuaries have been built over the centuries.

Of the two paths leading up Thuy Son, the one closer to the beach (at the end of the village) makes for a better circuit. At the top of the staircase is a gate, **Ong Chon**, which is marked with bullet holes. Behind Ong Chon is **Linh Ong Pagoda**. Entering the sanctuary, look to the left to see a fantastic figure with a huge tongue. To the right of Linh Ong are monks' quarters and a small orchid garden.

Behind Linh Ong, a path leads left through two short tunnels to several caverns known as **Tang Chon Dong**. There are several concrete buddhas and blocks of carved stone of Cham origin in these caves. Near one of the altars is a flight of steps leading up to another cave,

partially open to the sky, with two seated Buddhas in it.

Immediately to the left as you enter Ong Chon Gate is the main path to the rest of Thuy Son. Stairs off the main pathway lead to **Vong Hai Da**, a viewpoint for a brilliant panorama of China Beach.

The stone-paved path continues to the right and into a canyon. On the left is **Van Thong Cave**. Opposite the entrance is a cement Buddha, and behind that there is a narrow passage that leads up to a natural chimney open to the sky.

Exit the canyon and pass through a battle-scarred masonry gate. There's a rocky path to the right, which goes to **Linh Nham**, a tall chimney-shaped cave with a small altar inside. Nearby, another path leads to **Hoa Nghiem**, a shallow cave with a Buddha inside. If you go down the passageway to the left of the Buddha, you come to cathedral-like **Huyen Khong Cave**, lit by an opening to the sky. The entrance to this spectacular chamber is guarded by two administrative mandarins (to the left of the doorway) and two military mandarins (to the right).

Scattered about the cave are Buddhist and Confucian shrines; note the inscriptions carved into the stone walls. On the right a door leads to two stalactites, dripping water that comes from heaven, according to local legend. Actually, only one stalactite drips; the other one supposedly ran dry when Emperor Tu Duc touched it. During the American War this chamber was used by the VC as a field hospital. Inside is a plaque dedicated to the Women's Artillery Group, which destroyed 19 US aircraft from a base below the mountains in 1972.

Just to the left of the masonry gate is **Tam Thai Tu**, a pagoda restored by Emperor Minh Mang in 1826. A path heading obliquely to the right goes to the monks' residence, beyond which are two shrines. From there a red dirt path leads to five small pagodas. Before you arrive at the monks' residence, stairs on the left-hand side of the path lead to **Vong Giang Dai**, which offers a fantastic 180-degree view of the other Marble Mountains and the surrounding countryside. To get to the stairway follow the path straight on from the gate.

A torch (flashlight) is handy for exploring the caves. Local children have learned that foreigners buy souvenirs and leave tips for unsolicited guided tours, so you won't begin

your visit alone. And watch your wallets! The local government adopted a regulation that the children cannot take tips, but can sell souvenirs. This seems counterproductive; most travellers would rather tip the kids for the guided tours than buy the sorry souvenirs on offer. In general, the kids are good-natured, if extremely persistent, and some of the caves are difficult to find without their assistance.

Local buses between Danang and Hoi An (tickets 8000d) can drop you at Marble Mountains, 19km north of Hoi An.

Non Nuoc Hamlet

Non Nuoc Hamlet is on the southern side of Thuy Son and is a few hundred metres west of Non Nuoc Beach. The marble carvings made here would make great gifts if they didn't weigh so much. It's fun to watch the carvers at work, and there are some tiny carved figures that make nice presents.

The town has been spruced up for tourism. During the war, the Americans referred to the shantytown near here as 'Dogpatch', after a derelict town in the comic strip *L'il Abner*. Most of the residents living here at the time were refugees fleeing the fighting in the surrounding countryside.

China Beach

Thanks to the eponymous 1980s TV series, China Beach will forever be associated with pretty young military nurses complaining about their love lives to the accompaniment of the Rolling Stones' *Paint It Black*. During the war the Americans used the name to refer to the beautiful 30km swoop of fine white sand that starts at Monkey Mountain and finishes near Hoi An, with the Marble Mountains near its centre. The part they were most familiar with was the area close to Danang where soldiers stationed all over the country would be sent for some R&R. For some, a picnic on the beach was their last meal before their return to combat by helicopter.

The Vietnamese call sections of the beach by different names, including My Khe, My An, Non Nuoc and Cua Dai. In the last decade a clever entrepreneur cashing in on the TV series started calling the area in front of his hotel China Beach – although it's considerably south of where the Americans hung out.

While My Khe is now basically a suburb of Danang and Cua Dai is widely considered Hoi An's beach, much of the area in between

WARNING

The best time for swimming at China Beach is from May to July, when the sea is at its calmest. During other times the water can get rough; lifeguards only patrol parts of the beach. The dangerous winter conditions go hand-in-hand with large breakers, which are ideal for surfing – if you know what you're doing.

is gorgeously undeveloped. Not for long, however: a major four-lane dual carriageway has just been built along the entire length, with the beginnings of side roads starting and then abruptly stopping in the sand after a few metres. As you drive through small towns you can see where houses have been cut in half to widen the route.

The beachfront land has been divided into parcels with the government actively encouraging resort development. This could easily turn into another Mui Ne (see p300), with the open sandy vista hidden by the walls of luxury resorts. There are already a number of exclusive resorts at Cua Dai; quite how developers would fill another 30 is anyone's guess. Like Mui Ne, it may result in prices falling in the future.

In December 1992 China Beach was the site of the first international surfing competition in Vietnam. The surf can be very good from around mid-September to December, particularly in the morning when wind conditions are right.

MY KHE BEACH

Just across the Song Han Bridge (10,000d by *xe om*), My Khe is fast becoming Danang's easternmost suburb. In the early morning and evening the beach fills up with city-siders doing Tai Chi. After dark the deckchairs are more in demand than during the day, with young couples escaping crowded family homes for a starlit canoodle. Offshore the lights of the squid boats are a surreal sight – like a floating highway.

The water has a dangerous undertow, especially in winter. However, it is safer than the rest of China Beach; the bulk of Nui Son Tra protects it from winds that whip up rough surf.

This was the part of China Beach well known to American servicemen, and unfortunately a sleazy undertone lingers in parts.

Sleeping

The main beachside hotels are all looking a little shabby, but a couple of new entrants in the surrounding streets offer better value.

Blue Sea Hotel (Map p236; ☎ 0511-942 426; blue.seahotel@gmail.com; 235 Đ Nguyen Van Thoi; r US\$20-40; 📶) This friendly mid-sized hotel offers new and spotless rooms with satellite TV, fridges and bathtubs. Take the lane beside the My Khe Hotel and turn left at the end.

Golden Sea Hotel (Map p236; ☎ 0511-936 666; golden.seahotel@vnn.vn; B26-29 Đ Phạm Văn Đông; r US\$25-30, ste US\$50; 📶) Well positioned halfway between the city and the beach, the large new Golden Sea Hotel is in walking distance of both. Breakfast and internet access are provided free, and the suites have a steam room attached.

Eating & Drinking

My Khe Beach is rightly known for its excellent seafood restaurants.

My Hanh (Map p236; ☎ 0511-831 494; 18 Đ Du Lịch Sơn Trà; mains 80,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) My Khe Beach's most famous restaurant, it serves a wide selection of fish, shrimp, squid, eel and crab dishes on its seaside terrace.

Van Xuan (Map p236; ☎ 0511-941 234; 233A Đ Nguyen Van Thoi; dishes 18,000-100,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) An upmarket addition, Van Xuan has large tanks of live fish, lobsters and crocodiles. The owner once lived in Prague, and the restaurant brews its own Czech-style Five Mountains Beer.

Also worth trying is **Phuoc My** (Map p236; ☎ 0511-831 962; Đ Du Lịch Sơn Trà; meals 25,000-100,000d; 🍷 lunch & dinner) – a giggle-inducing name when pronounced correctly.

MY AN & NON NUOC BEACHES

The central section of China Beach is the least developed, with only a few hamlets and isolated resorts. It also offers the best surfing and diving.

Sleeping & Eating

Hoa's Place (Map p236; ☎ 0511-969 216; My An Beach; hoasplace@hotmail.com; r US\$6) This joint is small-scale, low key and laid back. Hoa and his wife ensure their home is your home. Good food and cheap beer (6000d) make it a smart lunch stop for passers-by. Take the second turning on the left past Furama heading south.

Sandy Beach Resort (Map p236; ☎ 0511-836 216; www.sandybeachdanang.com; 255 Đ Huyen Tran Cong Chua, Non Nuoc Beach; s US\$85-214, d US\$90-219, bungalow US\$120-231, villa US\$160-375; 📶) An older

resort given a make-over, Sandy Beach has intriguing echoes of 1970s socialist architecture, but it's clean and smart with two swimming pools, three bars and two restaurants. It has a wonderful location – just south of the Marble Mountains – on an isolated stretch of sand patrolled by its own lifeguards. Wi-fi internet is free.

Furama Resort Danang (Map p236; ☎ 0511-847 888; www.furamavietnam.com; 68 Đ Ho Xuan Huong, My An Beach; s US\$207-299, d US\$230-322, ste US\$575-690; 📶) This is Danang's luxury hotel. In fact, for a long time it was Vietnam's luxury hotel. Perched on a private slice of China Beach, this lavish resort features a diving facility, a golf driving range, a gym and two pools, one with a waterfall. Rooms have opulent bathrooms and the finest five-star trim. Day-use of the grounds, pools and fitness centre is US\$12 for nonguests. The restaurant is excellent although pricey; expect an extra US\$14 charge for breakfast.

CUA DAI BEACH

The fine sands of palm-lined Cua Dai Beach are popular at weekends, but can be deserted at other times. Safe swimming is usually only possible between April and October, but it's nice to walk or just hang out here. During the full moon, people wander around until late at night. Fresh seafood and refreshments are sold at a line of restaurants along the beachfront, all of which have deckchairs for hire.

Cua Dai Beach is 5km east of Hoi An on Đ Cua Dai.

Activities

Cua Dai is a good base for scuba divers exploring the nearby Cu Lao Cham Marine Park, 25 minutes away by speedboat (see p261). Vietnam's longest-standing and best-respected dive company, **Rainbow Divers** (☎ 0510-927 678; www.divevietnam.com) has a base at Cua Dai Beach, at the Hoi An Beach Resort. For certified divers, two dives cost US\$75. Training is available for beginners.

Cua Dai Beach is also the home of **Hoian Eco-Tour** (☎ 0510-927 808; www.hoianecotour.com; 7 Đ Cua Dai Beach; tours US\$35-50), which offers a range of tours giving an insight into traditional Vietnamese life, including river and sea fishing.

Sleeping

Cua Dai is home to some of the priciest resorts in Vietnam. If you're after a bargain, head for Hoi An.

Victoria Hoi An Resort (☎ 0510-927 040; www.victoria-hotels-asia.com; r US\$121-202, ste US\$242; 📶) Sitting on a huge slice of beach, this resort boasts all the stylish facilities you'd expect for the price, including a large pool, a separate children's pool and free wi-fi. Low-season discounts are usually available.

Palm Garden Resort (☎ 0510-927 927; www.palm-gardenresort.com.vn; Đ Lac Long Quan; r US\$173-225, bungalow US\$248-282, ste US\$1380; 📶) Another massive, super-flash new resort taking up a big chunk of beautiful beachfront, this one has an immense pool with a fountain and spouting dolphins, and a huge boat-shaped bar-restaurant. Active types can hire surfboards, windsurfers and jet skis, and there's a beach volleyball court set up.

Luxury junkies should keep an eye out for the **Nam Hai** (☎ 0510-940 000; www.gmhhotels.com; villas US\$550-2300; 📶). Not open at the time of research, it promises an exquisitely designed luxury village of villas, each with their own private pool.

HOI AN

☎ 0510 / pop 79,600

A highlight of any trip to Vietnam, Hoi An is a town oozing charm and history, having largely escaped the destruction of successive wars. Once a sleepy riverside village, it's now quite definitely a tourist town – with hotels, restaurants, bars, tailors and souvenir shops dominating the old centre. Despite this air of irreality, Hoi An's charisma pervades.

The local People's Committee periodically clamps down on touts, and while this doesn't mean a completely hassle-free visit, a stroll down the street is usually more relaxed here than in Huế or Nha Trang. Hoi An is pedestrian-friendly: the Old Town is closed to cars and the distances from the hotels to the centre are walkable. It's a great place to hire a bike.

Known as Faifo to Western traders, from the 17th to 19th centuries it was one of South-east Asia's major international ports. Vietnamese ships and sailors based here sailed all around Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

Perhaps more than any other place in Vietnam, Hoi An retains a sense of history that envelops you as you explore it. This is especially true on 'Hoi An Legendary Night'. Every month on the full moon, motorbikes are banned from the Old Town, which is transformed into a magical land of silk lanterns, traditional food, song and dance, and games in the streets.

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Every year during the rainy season, particularly in October and November, Hoi An has problems with flooding, especially in areas close to the waterfront. The greatest flood ever recorded in Hoi An took place in 1964, when the water reached all the way up to the roof beams of the houses. In late 2006 the town bore the brunt of the worst typhoon in 50 years, although at the time of research repairs were well in hand.

There's plenty to do in Hoi An. Emphatically the most enchanting place along the coast, this is one spot worth lingering in.

History

Recently excavated ceramic fragments from 2200 years ago constitute the earliest evidence of human habitation in the Hoi An area. They are thought to belong to the late-Iron Age Sa Huynh civilisation, which is related to the Dong Son culture of northern Vietnam.

From the 2nd to the 10th centuries, this was a busy seaport of the Champa kingdom (see p264). Persian and Arab documents from

the latter part of the period mention Hoi An as a provisions stop. Archaeologists have uncovered the foundations of numerous Cham towers around Hoi An: the bricks and stones were reused by Vietnamese settlers.

In 1307 the Cham king married the daughter of a monarch of the Tran dynasty and presented Quang Nam province to the Vietnamese as a gift. After his death, his successor refused to recognise the deal and fighting broke out: for the next century chaos reigned. By the 15th century peace had been restored, allowing normal commerce to resume. During the next four centuries Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, French, British and American ships came to Hoi An to purchase high-grade silk (for which the area is famous), fabrics, paper, porcelain, tea, sugar, molasses, areca nuts, pepper, Chinese medicines, elephant tusks, beeswax, mother-of-pearl, lacquer, sulphur and lead.

The Chinese and Japanese traders sailed south in the spring, driven by winds from the northeast. They would stay in Hoi An until

the summer, when southerly winds would blow them home. During their four-month sojourn in Hoi An, the merchants rented waterfront houses for use as warehouses and living quarters. Some traders began leaving full-time agents in Hoi An to take care of off-season business affairs. This is how foreign colonies got started, although the Japanese ceased coming to Hoi An after 1637, when the Japanese government forbade all contact with the outside world.

Hoi An was the site of the first Chinese settlement in southern Vietnam. The town's Chinese *hoi quan* (congregational assembly halls) still play a special role among southern Vietnam's ethnic Chinese, some of whom come to Hoi An from all over the region to participate in congregation-wide celebrations. Today 1300 of Hoi An's population of 75,800 are ethnic Chinese. Relations between ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese in Hoi An are excellent, partly because the Chinese have become assimilated to the point where they even speak Vietnamese among themselves.

This was also the first place in Vietnam to be exposed to Christianity. Among the 17th-century missionary visitors was the French priest Alexandre de Rhodes, who devised the Latin-based *quoc ngu* script for the Vietnamese language.

Hoi An was almost completely destroyed during the Tay Son Rebellion. It was rebuilt and continued to serve as an important port for foreign trade until the late 19th century, when the Thu Bon River (Cai River), which links Hoi An with the sea, silted up and became too shallow for navigation. During this period Danang (Tourane) began to eclipse Hoi An as a port and centre of commerce. In 1916 a rail line linking Danang with Hoi An was destroyed in a terrible storm; it was never rebuilt.

Under French rule Hoi An served as an administrative centre. During the American War the city, with the cooperation of both sides, remained almost completely undamaged.

Orientation

The Thu Bon River forms the southern edge of the Old Town. Bridges link this to the An Hoi Peninsula and Cam Nam Island. The newer part of town stretches to the north. The road to Cua Dai Beach heads east. Many streets have changed names and/or been renumbered. In some cases the old and new numbers sit side by side on buildings.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Khai Tri (52 Đ Le Loi) Sells secondhand books and dodgy copies.

EMERGENCY

Hoi An Police Station (☎ 861 204; 84 Đ Hoang Dieu)

INTERNET ACCESS

Min's Computer (☎ 914 323; 125 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; per hr 4000d) Access is slow throughout Hoi An, but this is as good as any.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr Ho Huu Phuoc Practice (☎ 867 419; 74 Đ Le Loi; ☎ 11am-12.30pm & 5-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-12.30pm Sat & Sun) A local doctor who speaks English.

Hoi An Hospital (☎ 861 364; 4 Đ Tran Hung Dao) If it's anything serious, make for Danang.

MONEY

Incombank (☎ 861 261; 4 Đ Hoang Dieu) This branch and another at 9 Đ Le Loi both change cash and travellers cheques, offer Visa advances and have ATMs.

POST

Main post office (☎ 861 480; 6 Đ Tran Hung Dao)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Competition is pretty fierce, so for expensive or complicated arrangements it's probably worth checking out a few options and negotiating.

Hoi An Old Town Booth (Đ Hoang Dieu) A handy spot to pick up an Old Town ticket.

Nga (☎ 863 485; lenga22us@yahoo.com; 22 Đ Phan Boi Chau) Handles plane, train and open-tour bus bookings, tours to My Son and Cham Island, boat trips and car rentals.

Sinh Café (☎ 863 948; www.sinhcafevn.com; 18B Đ Phan Dinh Phung) Books reputable open-tour buses.

Tourist Service Office (☎ 862 952; 78 Đ Le Loi) Also books good open-tour buses

Dangers & Annoyances

Generally speaking, Hoi An is one of the safer towns in Vietnam, but there have been stories of late-night bag-snatching in the poorly lit market area of town.

We have also heard accounts of women being followed to their hotels and assaulted on very rare occasions. If you are a lone female, try and make sure you walk home with somebody. In the very unlikely event that something like this happens, shout and scream as Hoi An is a very quiet town by night.

A worrying trend here as in other parts of Vietnam is the use of children to sell trinkets, postcards and newspapers. Don't be fooled into thinking that the kids actually see the money themselves. One can only hope that if tourists stop buying from the children, their controllers will stop using them – perhaps freeing them to pursue an education.

Sights

Now a Unesco World Heritage site, **Hoi An Old Town** (www.hoianworldheritage.org; entrance ticket 75,000d) is governed by preservation laws that are well up to speed. Several buildings of historical and cultural significance are open for public viewing, a number of streets in the centre of town are off-limits to cars, and building alterations and height restrictions are well enforced. If only Hanoi would follow suit in its historic Old Quarter.

The admission fee goes towards funding this conservation work. This ticket gives you a complicated choice of heritage attractions to visit. You can attend a traditional music show at the handicraft workshop, and one each of the four following types of attractions: museums; assembly halls; old houses; and 'other'. If you want to visit additional attractions, then it is necessary to buy another ticket; there are ticket offices dotted around the centre.

But for those who only want to buy one ticket, what are the best options? The most interesting museum is that of Trading Ceramics, mainly for the building it's housed in. Among the assembly halls, the Fujian folk probably have the edge. When it comes to old houses, the Tran Family Chapel offers an interesting and informative tour. Finally there is that obscure 'other' category: the shrine in the Japanese Bridge or Quan Cong Temple. Choose the temple: the Japanese Bridge ticket just gets you into a small shrine that is second-best to the bridge itself, which you can enjoy free.

The system doesn't seem to be too well monitored, but hopefully the fees do get collected and end up as part of the restoration and preservation fund. Not all of Hoi An's old houses and assembly halls require a ticket, and there's certainly nothing to stop anybody from wandering the old streets to admire the houses.

Despite the number of tourists who come to Hoi An, it is still a conservative town, and visitors should dress modestly when visiting the sites.

JAPANESE COVERED BRIDGE

This famed **bridge** (Cau Nhat Ban) connects Đ Tran Phu with Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. The first bridge on this site was constructed in the 1590s. It was built by the Japanese community of Hoi An in order to link them with the Chinese quarters across the stream.

The Japanese Covered Bridge is very solidly constructed; the original builders were concerned about the threat of earthquakes. Over the centuries the ornamentation has remained relatively faithful to the original Japanese design. Its understatement contrasts greatly with the Vietnamese and Chinese penchant for wild decoration. The French flattened out the roadway to make it suitable for their motor vehicles, but the original arched shape was restored during major renovation work in 1986.

Built into the northern side of the bridge is a small **temple** (Chua Cau; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket). The writing over its door is the name given to the bridge in 1719 to replace the name meaning Japanese Covered Bridge. However the new name, Lai Vien Kieu (Bridge for Passers-by from Afar), never quite caught on.

According to legend, there once lived an enormous monster called Cu, who had its head in India, its tail in Japan and its body in Vietnam. Whenever the monster moved, terrible disasters such as floods and earthquakes befell Vietnam. This bridge was built on the monster's weakest point and killed it, but the people of Hoi An took pity on the slain monster and built this temple to pray for its soul.

The entrances of the bridge are guarded by a pair of monkeys on one side and a pair of dogs on the other. According to one story, these animals were popularly revered because many of Japan's emperors were born in years of the dog and monkey. Another tale says that construction of the bridge started in the year of the monkey and was finished in the year of the dog.

The stela, listing all the Vietnamese and Chinese contributors to a subsequent restoration of the bridge, are written in *chu nho* (Chinese characters) – the *nom* script had not yet become popular in these parts.

MUSEUMS

Showcasing a collection of blue and white ceramics of the Dai Viet period, the **Museum of Trading Ceramics** (80 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) occupies a simply restored house

made of dark wood. In particular, check out the great ceramic mosaic that's set above the pond in the inner courtyard.

Housed in the Quan Am Pagoda, the **Hoi An Museum of History & Culture** (7 Đ Nguyen Hué; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-5pm) has a small collection of bronze temple bells, gongs and Cham artefacts.

Artefacts from the early Dong Son civilisation of Sa Huynh are displayed downstairs at the **Museum of Sa Huynh Culture & Museum of the Revolution** (149 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-5pm). Upstairs, the Revolution museum has the usual collection of local photos and mementos of the last two wars, including a boat used to transport cadres. It would be more accessible if full English captions were provided.

ASSEMBLY HALLS

Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation

Founded as a place to hold community meetings, this **assembly hall** (Phuc Kien; opposite 35 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) was later transformed into a temple for the worship of Thien Hau, a deity from Fujian province. The triple gate to the complex was built in 1975.

The mural on the right-hand wall near the entrance to the main hall depicts Thien Hau, her way lit by lantern light as she crosses a stormy sea to rescue a foundering ship. On the wall opposite is a mural of the heads of the six Fujian families who fled from China to Hoi An in the 17th century, following the overthrow of the Ming dynasty.

The penultimate chamber contains a statue of Thien Hau. To either side of the entrance stand red-skinned Thuan Phong Nhi and green-skinned Thien Ly Nhan. When either sees or hears sailors in distress, they inform Thien Hau, who sets off to effect a rescue. The replica of a Chinese boat along the right-hand wall is 1:20 scale.

The central altar in the last chamber contains seated figures of the heads of the six Fujian families. The smaller figures below them represent their successors as clan leaders. Behind the altar on the left is the God of Prosperity. On the right are three fairies and smaller figures representing the 12 *ba mu* (midwives), each of whom teaches newborns a different skill necessary for the first year of life: smiling, sucking, lying on their stomachs and so forth. Childless couples often come

here to pray for offspring. The three groups of figures in this chamber represent the elements most central to Chinese life: ancestors, children and financial wellbeing.

The middle altar of the room to the right of the courtyard commemorates deceased leaders of the Fujian congregation. On either side are lists of contributors – women on the left and men on the right. The wall panels represent the four seasons.

The Fujian assembly hall is fairly well lit and can be visited after dark. Shoes should be removed upon mounting the platform just past the naves.

Assembly Hall of the Cantonese Chinese Congregation

Founded in 1786, this **assembly hall** (176 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-5pm) has a main altar that is dedicated to Quan Cong (see p246). Note the long-handled brass fans to either side of the altar. The lintel and door posts of the main entrance and a number of the columns supporting the roof are made of single blocks of granite. The other columns were carved out of the durable wood of the jackfruit tree. There are intricate carvings on the wooden beams that support the roof in front of the main entrance.

Assembly Hall of the Chaozhou Chinese Congregation

The Chaozhou Chinese in Hoi An built their **congregational hall** (Trieu Chau; opposite 157 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-5pm) in 1776. Some outstanding woodcarvings are on the beams, walls and altar. On the doors in front of the altar are carvings of two Chinese girls wearing their hair in a Japanese style.

Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall

Founded in 1773, the **Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall** (Chua Ba; ☎ 861 935; 64 Tran Phu; admission free) was used by Fujian, Cantonese, Hainan, Chaozhou and Hakka congregations in Hoi An. The pavilions off the main courtyard incorporate elements of 19th-century French architecture.

Assembly Hall of the Hainan Chinese Congregation

Built in 1851, this **assembly hall** (10 Đ Tran Phu; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a memorial to 108 merchants from Hainan Island who were mistaken for pirates and killed in Quang Nam

province during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc. The elaborate dais contains plaques to their memory. In front of the central altar is a fine gilded woodcarving of Chinese court life.

OLD HOUSES

Tan Ky House

Built two centuries ago as the home of a well-to-do ethnic-Vietnamese merchant, **Tan Ky House** (☎ 861 474; 101 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) has been lovingly preserved and today looks almost exactly as it did in the early 19th century.

The design of Tan Ky House shows some evidence of the Japanese and Chinese influence on local architecture. Japanese elements include the ceiling (in the area immediately before the courtyard), which is supported by three progressively shorter beams, one on top of the other. There are similar beams in the salon. Under the crab-shell ceiling there are carvings of crossed sabres wrapped in silk ribbon. The sabres symbolise force; the silk represents flexibility.

Chinese poems written in inlaid mother-of-pearl are hung from a number of the columns that hold up the roof. The Chinese characters on these 150-year-old panels are formed entirely of birds gracefully portrayed in various positions of flight.

The courtyard here has several functions: to let in light, provide ventilation, bring a glimpse of nature into the home, and collect rainwater and provide drainage. The stone tiles covering the patio floor were brought from Thanh Hoa province in north-central Vietnam. The carved wooden balcony supports around the courtyard are decorated with grape leaves, which are a European import and further evidence of the unique blending of cultures that took place in Hoi An.

The back of the house faces the river. In the past, this section of the building was rented out to foreign merchants. That the house was a place of commerce as well as a residence is indicated by the two pulleys attached to a beam in the storage loft just inside the front door.

The exterior of the roof is made of tiles; inside, the ceiling consists of wood. This design keeps the house cool in summer and warm in winter. The floor tiles were brought from near Hanoi.

Tan Ky House is a private home; the owner, whose family has lived here for seven generations, speaks fluent French and English.

Tran Family Chapel

The Tran family moved from China to Vietnam in around 1700. Built in 1802, the **Tran Family Chapel** (21 Đ Le Loi; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) is a house for worshipping ancestors. It was built by one of the Tran clan who ascended to the rank of mandarin and once served as an Ambassador to China. His picture is to the right of the chapel.

The architecture of the building reflects the influence of Chinese and Japanese styles. The central door is reserved for the dead – it's opened at Tet and on the anniversary of the main ancestor. Traditionally, women entered from the left and men from the right, although these distinctions are no longer observed in supposedly egalitarian communist Vietnam.

The wooden boxes on the altar contain the Tran ancestors' stone tablets – featuring chiselled Chinese characters setting out the dates of birth and death – along with some small personal effects. On the anniversary of each family member's death, their box is opened, incense is burned and food is offered. Nowadays photographs have replaced the stone tablets.

There's a museum and souvenir shop at the back of the chapel. The small garden behind is where the placentas of newborn family members are buried – the practice is meant to prevent fighting between the children.

Quan Thang House

This private **house** (77 Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 7am-5pm) is three centuries old and has been in the family for six generations, having been built by an ancestor who was a Chinese captain. Again, the architecture includes Japanese and Chinese elements. There is some especially fine carving on the teak walls of the rooms around the courtyard, on the roof beams and under the crab-shell roof (in the salon next to the courtyard). Look out for the green ceramic tiles built into the railing around the courtyard balcony.

Phung Hung Old House

In a lane full of beautiful buildings, this old **house** (4 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket; ☎ 8am-7pm) stands out. It's still a family home, having housed eight generations over 226 years. At present it showcases hand embroidery and souvenirs; wander through and enjoy the ambience.

Tran Duong House

There's a whole city block of colonnaded French-colonial buildings on Đ Phan Boi Chau, between Nos 22 and 73, among them the 19th-century **Tran Duong House** (25 Đ Phan Boi Chau; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 9am-6pm). Mr Duong, a charming retired mathematics teacher, speaks English and French, and is happy to explain the history of his 62m-long house that has been in his family for six generations. The large wooden table in the front room is the family bed.

Diep Dong Nguyen House

Built for a wealthy Chinese merchant in the late 19th century is **Diep Dong Nguyen House** (58 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm). The front room on the ground floor was once a dispensary for *thuoc bac* (Chinese medicine); the medicines were stored in the glass-enclosed cases lining the walls. The owner's private collection of antiques – which includes photographs, porcelain and furniture – is on display upstairs. Two of the chairs were once lent by the family to Emperor Bao Dai.

Old House at 103 Đ Tran Phu

The wooden frontage and shutters make a good photographic backdrop to this eclectic **shop** (103 Đ Tran Phu; admission free), where women make silk lanterns.

TEMPLES & PAGODAS

Quan Cong Temple

Founded in 1653, **Quan Cong Temple** (Chua Ong; 24 Đ Tran Phu; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) is dedicated to Quan Cong – a highly esteemed Chinese general who is worshipped as a symbol of loyalty, sincerity, integrity and justice. His partially gilt statue, made of papier-mâché on a wooden frame, is in the central altar at the back of the sanctuary. On the left is a statue of General Chau Xuong, one of Quan Cong's guardians, striking a tough-guy pose. On the right is the rather camp and plump administrative mandarin Quan Binh. The life-size white horse recalls a mount ridden by Quan Cong, until he was given a red horse of extraordinary endurance, representations of which are common in Chinese pagodas.

Check out the carp-shaped rain spouts on the roof surrounding the courtyard. The carp

is a symbol of patience in Chinese mythology and is popular in Hoi An.

Shoes should be removed when mounting the platform in front of the statue of Quan Cong.

Chuc Thanh Pagoda

Founded in 1454 by Minh Hai, a Buddhist monk from China, **Chuc Thanh Pagoda** (Khu Vuc 7, Tan An; ☎ 8am-6pm) is the oldest pagoda in Hoi An. Among the antique ritual objects still in use are several bells, a stone gong that is two centuries old and a carp-shaped wooden gong said to be even older.

In the main sanctuary the gilt Chinese characters inscribed on a red roof beam give details of the pagoda's construction. An A Di Da Buddha flanked by two Thich Ca Buddhas sits under a wooden canopy on the central dais. In front of them is a statue of a boyhood Thich Ca flanked by his servants.

To get to Chuc Thanh Pagoda, go north all the way to the end of Đ Nguyen Truong To and turn left. Follow the sandy path for 500m.

Phuoc Lam Pagoda

Phuoc Lam Pagoda (Thon 2A, Cam Ha; ☎ 8am-5pm) was founded in the mid-17th century. The head monk at the end of that century was An Thiem, a Vietnamese prodigy who became a monk at the age of eight. When he was 18, the king drafted An Thiem's brothers into his army to put down a rebellion. An Thiem volunteered to take the places of the other men in his family and eventually rose to the rank of general. After the war he returned to monkhood, but felt guilty about the many people he had slain. To atone for his sins, he volunteered to clean the Hoi An Market for 20 years. When that time was up, he was asked to come to Phuoc Lam Pagoda as head monk.

To reach the pagoda, continue past Chuc Thanh Pagoda for 400m. The path passes an obelisk that was erected over the tomb of 13 ethnic Chinese, who had been decapitated by the Japanese during WWII for resistance activities.

Other Temples & Pagodas

Serving the local community, the **Cao Dai pagoda** (88 Đ Hung Vuong), near the bus station, is surrounded by peaceful gardens.

The **Phac Hat Pagoda** (673 Hai Ba Trung) has a colourful façade of ceramics and murals and is an active place of worship.

The less ornate and newish **Cam Pho Temple** (52 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; ☎ 8am-5pm) is notable mainly for its ceramic dragon roof line.

HANDICRAFT WORKSHOP

Housed in the 200-year-old trading house of a Chinese merchant, the **Handicraft Workshop** (☎ 910 216; 9 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; admission Hoi An Old Town ticket) delivers what it promises – in the back section you can watch artisans making silk lanterns and taking part in traditional crafts like embroidery. It's a good place to pick up souvenirs. Fascinating cultural performances are held in the front hall twice daily (10.15am and 3.15pm), featuring traditional singers, dancers and musicians.

BA LE WELL

Said to date from Cham times, this well is square in shape. Its claim to fame is that it's the only place you're able to draw water from if you're to make authentic *cao lau*, a Hoi An specialty (see p250). You're likely to see elderly people making their daily pilgrimage to fill metal pails here. To find it, turn down the alley opposite 35 Đ Phan Chu Trinh and take the second laneway to the right.

Hoi An Walking Tour

This tasty little trail takes you past Hoi An's main sights in a half-day amble. If you want to venture inside some of the buildings, call into the Tourist Service Office (p242) to purchase your Hoi An Old Town ticket before you set off.

Start at the **Tran Family Chapel** (1; p245). Head south on Đ Le Loi and turn left at the next junction onto Đ Tran Phu. On your right you'll find **Quan Thang House** (2; p245) and a little further on the left, the **Museum of Trading Ceramics** (3; p243). Continuing along Đ Tran Phu, there is a cluster of interesting buildings on the left side of the road, including the **Chinese All-Community Assembly Hall** (4; p244) and the **Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation** (5; p244). Keep heading east and at the next junction take a short detour north on Đ Nguyen Hue to the **Hoi An Museum of History & Culture** (6; p244). Back on Tran Phu you'll see the **Quan Cong Temple** (7; opposite). Still walking east on Đ Tran Phu, the **Assembly Hall of the Hainan Chinese Congregation** (8; p244) is on the left. Cross the next junction and the road becomes Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu. On the left is the **Assembly Hall of the Chaozhou Chinese Congregation** (9; p244).

ARCHITECTURAL SURVIVORS

Given the amount of bombs dropped on Vietnam in the last 70 years, it's hardly surprising that structures less than a century old are often tagged 'ancient' – leaving tourists wondering why they went out of their way to see a plain French colonial building that wouldn't warrant a second glance on the streets of Sydney or Auckland, let alone Paris or London.

Hoi An is the exception. More than 800 structures of historical significance have been officially identified, including a number of wooden buildings dating from the 18th century. Many exhibit features of traditional architecture rarely seen today.

As they have for centuries, some shopfronts are shuttered at night with horizontal planks inserted into grooves that cut into the columns that support the roof. Some of the buildings' roofs are made up of thousands of brick-coloured *am* and *duong* (Yin and Yang) roof tiles – so called because of the way the alternating rows of concave and convex tiles fit snugly together. During the rainy season the lichens and moss that live on the tiles spring to life, turning entire rooftops bright green.

A number of Hoi An's houses have round pieces of wood with an *am-duong* symbol in the middle surrounded by a spiral design over the doorway. These *mat cua* (door eyes) are supposed to protect the residents from harm.

It's not just individual buildings that have survived – it's whole streetscapes. This is particularly true around the Old Town's Đ Tran Phu and the waterside promenade Đ Bach Dang. In the former French quarter to the east of Cam Nam Bridge there's a whole block of colonnaded houses, painted in the mustard yellow typical of French colonial buildings.

Hoi An's historic structures are gradually being restored and there is a sincere effort being made to preserve the unique character of the city. The local government has put some thought into this: old houses must be licensed for restoration work, which must be done in a tasteful manner. One can only hope that at some point money will be found to bury the mesh of drooping powerlines underground.

Other budget options:

Hop Yen Hotel (☎ 863 153; hopyenhotel@yahoo.com; Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$6-12; 🏠 📺 📶) A humble hostel that has helpful staff. The cheapest rate will get you a small room with no air-conditioning up four flights of stairs.

Phu Thinh I Hotel (☎ 861 297; www.phuthinhhotels.com; 144 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$8-20; 🏠 📺 📶) Some of the rooms are dark and windowless, but the location's great, the price is good and there's a pleasant garden forecourt.

MIDRANGE

Phuong Nam Hotel (☎ 923 401; www.hoianphuongnamhotel.com; 224 Đ Ly Thai To; r US\$12-30; 🏠 📺 📶) This popular new place with clean, comfy rooms is tied in with the Sinh Café open-tour crowd. The quiet location to the north of town is a blessing and a curse, as there's not much in easy walking distance. Hourly shuttles head to and from the centre and bicycles are provided free of charge.

our pick Phuoc An Hotel (☎ 916 757; www.hoianhotels.com.vn; 31/1 Đ Tran Cao Van; r US\$12-35; 🏠 📺 📶) The staff at this wonderful hotel are exceptionally welcoming, and the rooms attractive and very comfortable – although it can get a little noisy. Bicycles, breakfast and internet access are provided free.

Thien Thanh Hotel (Blue Sky Hotel; ☎ 916 545; www.bluesky-hoian.com; 16 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$15-35; 🏠 📺 📶) Most of the rooms have breezy balconies at the back with views over the rice paddies. The hotel is smart, laid-back and friendly. The swimming pool and wireless internet are the icing on the cake.

Vinh Hung 1 Hotel (☎ 861 621; quanghuy.ha@dng.vnn.vn; 143 Đ Tran Phu; r US\$15-45; 🏠 📺 📶) Set in a classic Chinese trading house, this is an atmospheric hotel. Splash the cash for one of two rooms used as dressing rooms by Michael Caine while filming *The Quiet American*; each is decorated with antiques and a beautiful canopy bed.

Pho Hoi Riverside Resort (☎ 862 628; www.phohoi-riversidehoian.com; T1, Cam Nam Village; r US\$15-65, bungalow US\$60-70; 🏠 📺 📶) This sprawling, flash place on the south bank of the river has the best views in town. The cheaper rooms are in the old block behind, but the majority have a picturesque and quiet garden setting.

An Huy Hotel (☎ 862 116; www.anhuyhotel.com; 30 Đ Phan Boi Chau; r US\$18-25; 🏠 📺 📶) In the French quarter of the Old Town, this new boutique hotel has small but stylish rooms, and offers free breakfast and bicycles.

Vinh Hung 2 Hotel (☎ 863 717; quanghuy.ha@dng.vnn.vn; cnr Đ Hai Ba Trung & Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$20-40; 🏠 📺 📶)

The chic, comfortable, Chinese-themed rooms all face on to the swimming pool in the central courtyard.

Phu Thinh II Hotel (☎ 923 923; www.phuthinhhotels.com; 488 Đ Cua Dai; r US\$30-35; 🏠 📺 📶) The swimming pool and palm-shaded garden at the rear of this large complex face on to beautiful fields and a lotus lake. The quiet rooms are fitted with dark wooden furniture, and some have power showers.

Ha An Hotel (☎ 863 126; tohuong@fpt.vn; 6-8 Đ Phan Boi Chau; r US\$30-50; 🏠 📺 📶) A French Quarter hotel, with a dose of decorative flair. This strip of buildings is built in Hoi An style (one French, one Chinese and so on), all set in a lush garden.

Other solid options, both with rooms facing on to central swimming pools, backing on to rice fields:

Thuy Duong 3 Hotel (☎ 916 565; www.thuyduonghotel-hoian.com; 92-94 Đ Ba Trieu; r US\$35-45; 🏠 📺 📶) The décor has a Chinese feel.

Glory Hotel Hoi An (☎ 914 444; www.gloryhotelhoian.com; 538 Đ Cua Dai; r US\$35-80; 🏠 📺 📶) A similar standard, further out, on the road to the beach.

TOP END

Vinh Hung Resort (☎ 910 577; vinhhung.ha@dng.vnn.vn; An Hoi Peninsula; r US\$70-100, ste US\$110; 🏠 📺 📶) The latest member of the Vinh Hung family has a lovely quiet location and a lush garden. Rooms are enormous and set around a central swimming pool.

Life Resort Hoi An (☎ 914 555; www.life-resorts.com; 1 Đ Pham Hong Thai; r US\$159, ste US\$182-308; 🏠 📺 📶) The most luxurious option in Hoi An, Life Resort has a prime French Quarter riverside frontage, lush gardens and a stunning infinity pool framed by frangipani trees. The rooms are beautifully designed, and the spa treatments suitably enticing.

Eating

Hoi An's main contribution to Vietnamese cuisine is *cao lau*, doughy flat noodles combined with croutons, bean sprouts and greens and topped off with pork slices. It is mixed with crumbled, crispy rice paper immediately before eating. Other Hoi An specialities are fried won ton, *banh xeo* (crispy savoury pancakes rolled with herbs in fresh rice paper) and the delicate 'white rose' (shrimp encased in rice paper and steamed).

The beauty of Hoi An is that you can find a spectacular cheap meal at the Central Market and in local restaurants in secluded residential

laneways – or you can chose an upmarket eatery, lavish even by Western standards, serving excellent fusion cuisine. There are heaps of such restaurants on Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc, Đ Tran Phu and on the waterfront. A newer stretch of eateries and bars is worth exploring, facing the Old Town on the An Hoi riverbank. While a pricy town for Vietnam, it remains a bargain for most visitors.

VIETNAMESE – TRADITIONAL

Green Moss (☎ 863 728; 155 Đ Nguyen Duy Hieu; dishes 10,000-30,000đ) Housed in a lovely French-colonial house, Green Moss serves a tasty mix of Vietnamese and Thai dishes with plenty of vegetarian options. Try for the two-person tables under the shade of the trees on the colonnaded balcony.

our pick Restaurant Café 96 (☎ 910 441; 96 Đ Bach Dang; dishes 10,000-35,000đ) With paint peeling to expose the brick beneath and a woven flax ceiling, this riverside restaurant has the perfectly decrepit look Western interior designers would spend a fortune creating. The food is sublime – traditional Vietnamese with all of the Hoi An specialties. Try the set menu (40,000đ), or at the very least the grilled fish wrapped in banana leaf.

Café 43 (43 Đ Tran Cao Van; dishes 15,000-40,000đ) Stuck away in a quiet laneway, this humble restaurant occupies the doorstep of a delightful family's home. At night it's lit with red silk lanterns. The food's excellent (try the *banh xeo*) and incredibly cheap, and the ice-cold beer's even cheaper.

Dac San Hoi An (☎ 861 533; 89 Đ Tran Phu; dishes 7000-60,000đ; 🍷 lunch & dinner) True to its name (translating as Hoi An specialties), this place does great *banh xeo*, *cao lau* and 'white rose'. The upstairs balcony affords a great view of one of Hoi An's nicest streets.

Mermaid Restaurant (☎ 861 527; 2 Đ Tran Phu; dishes 18,000-68,000đ; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of the original Hoi An eateries, this is still a favourite for its fried spring rolls with noodles and herbs, and its excellent 'white rose'.

Also worth checking out:

Hoi An River Restaurant (☎ 910 809; 44 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 10,000-20,000đ) A cheap and friendly traditional family restaurant. Food is bought to order from the nearby market – so expect super-fresh but slow.

Quan Loan (98 Đ Le Loi; dishes 10,000-20,000đ) This humble noodle nook serves excellent *pho* and *cao lau*.

Miss Ly Cafeteria 22 (☎ 861 603; 22 Đ Nguyen Hue; dishes 15,000-45,000đ) A local institution for local specialties.

VIETNAMESE – UPMARKET

Café des Amis (☎ 861 616; 52 Đ Bach Dang; 5-course set menu 90,000đ; 🍷 dinner) This little riverside eatery has earned a loyal following over the past decade. There's no menu; the set dinner is whatever the chef, Mr Kim, feels like cooking that day. It's always delicious and there's always a vegetarian option.

Mango Rooms (☎ 910 839; 111 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; mains 85,000-145,000đ) This restaurant's well-justified reputation for interesting modern Vietnamese cuisine has spread far and wide – with even Mick Jagger seeking culinary satisfaction here. Tropical fruits and fresh herbs feature prominently in the food, as well as in the inventive cocktails. Stylishly decorated in bright primary colours, you can choose between the formal dining room at the front or low tables with cushions on the river side. The kitchen in the centre proudly demonstrates that it's got nothing to hide from fussy hygiene-sensitive tourists.

Brothers Café (☎ 914 150; 27-29 Đ Phan Boi Chau; dishes US\$6-12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Looking like a film set, in one of the finest French-colonial buildings in town, the attention to designer detail is perfect. It is properly pricey by Hoi An standards, so many just drop by for a drink in the gorgeous riverside garden.

INTERNATIONAL

Hai Scout Café (☎ 863 210; 98 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 12,000-55,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Another interesting Old Town building, it stretches into a large garden courtyard which breaks into a bar by night. It serves sandwiches, Western-style breakfasts, Vietnamese and European mains, and real espresso. There's a display on WWF projects in central Vietnam out back, and some traditional minority tribal crafts for sale.

Café Can (☎ 861 525; 74 Đ Bach Dang; dishes 15,000-70,000đ) Housed in a grand old French building, this café has a wide sundeck out front for a breezy bite to eat. Choose from Vietnamese and international dishes or just dabble with the drinks.

The Cargo Club (☎ 910 489; 107 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; dishes 18,000-70,000đ; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're chasing an omelette for breakfast or a baguette for lunch, this is your place. It has mouth-watering pastries downstairs and distinguished dining upstairs, plus a balcony terrace overlooking the river. The menu's an eclectic mix of French, Italian, Vietnamese and Thai. After dark it morphs into a groovy bar.

Omar Khayyam's Indian Restaurant (☎ 864 538; 24 Đ Tran Hung Dao; dishes 30,000-80,000d) The place for curry connoisseurs, with plenty of vegetarian options.

Hoi An Hai San (☎ 861 652; 64 Đ Bach Dang; dishes 30,000-110,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This seafood restaurant serves innovative Vietnamese concoctions and some Swedish dishes to keep the chef-owner in touch with his roots.

Good Morning Vietnam (☎ 910 227; 34 Đ Le Loi; mains 38,000-105,000d) The real deal with Italian owners and chefs, it serves the best pizzas and pastas in town.

Drinking

For a little place, Hoi An has quite the selection of interesting bars – most offering two for one local cocktails in happy hours that stretch dangerously long. Many of them are open into the early hours, which is quite unusual in itself. If you last the distance, you may have the uniquely Vietnamese experience of stepping over sleeping hotel staff catching their precious few hours of rest on the reception floor.

Avoid *xe om* drivers at night offering to take you to out-of-the-way venues. We've heard reports of extortionate prices for the return trip being demanded, occasionally accompanied by physical threats. Luckily all the best bars are smack in the centre of the Old Town.

Before & Now (☎ 910 599; 51 Đ Le Loi) This swanky bar wouldn't be out of place in London, particularly given the Brit-pop playlist. The walls are plastered in pop-art portraits of everyone from Marx, Lenin, Mao and Che to Marilyn, Gandhi and Bono-as-Superman.

Tam Tam Cafe (☎ 862 212; 110 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) Tam Tam has its home in a lovingly restored tea warehouse. There are tables on the street, but the heart and soul of this place remains upstairs, where there is a large lounge and dining area as well as a popular pool table. European and Vietnamese food is on offer here, and there's a fine wine list and bar snacks for those just wanting something to partner a jug of beer.

Lounge Bar (☎ 910 480; 102 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) Just along the road from Tam Tam, this is a stylish conversion of an ancient house with a huge drinks menu. Out back are cushions and a chill-out area.

Treat's Café (☎ 861 125; 158 Đ Tran Phu) The back-packer bar of old Hoi An, this place is regularly full to bursting. It is a sprawling place with a restaurant-café upstairs. The oh-so-happy

happy hours between 4pm and 9pm include two-for-one spirits and bargain beer.

Re-Treat Café (☎ 910 527; 69 Đ Tran Hung Dao) Re-creates Treat's recipe in the newer part of town, 'same same but better'. Not quite, but takes a walk if you're staying here.

Shopping

Hoi An has a long history of flogging goods to international visitors, and while the port's no longer in business, the people of Hoi An haven't lost their commercial edge. It's a common occurrence for travellers not planning to buy anything to leave Hoi An laden down with extra bags – which, by the way, are easily purchased here.

The big lure is the clothes (see p262). The number of tailor shops is just extraordinary – somewhere around 500. For a look at the material available locally, take a peek at the **Hoi An Cloth Market** (Đ Tran Phu). Hoi An has long been known for fabric production.

It is not only clothes that are being turned out in quantity – shoes are now a popular purchase. The cobblers here can copy anything from sneakers (trainers) to the highest heels or the coolest Cubans. Prices are very low, so it's a great place to pick up sandals, copycat Campers or anything else that takes your fancy.

Reaching Out (☎ 862 460; 103 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm) is a great place to spend your dong. It's a fair-trade gift shop with profits going towards assisting disabled artisans.

The presence of numerous tourists has turned the fake-antique business into a major growth industry for Hoi An. Theoretically you could find something here that is really old, but it's hard to believe that all the genuine stuff wasn't scooped up long ago. Proceed with scepticism. On the other hand, there is some really elegant artwork around, even if it was turned out only yesterday. Paintings are generally of the mass-produced kind, but are still hand-painted; for a few US dollars you can't complain. A row of **art galleries** (Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai), inside the gorgeous old buildings just across from the Japanese Covered Bridge, are great to browse through.

And now that you've bought that lovely artwork, you need to light it properly. Lighting is a major growth industry here and lanterns lead the way. Popular Chinese lanterns come in various shapes and sizes, all easily foldable.

(Continued on page 261)

(Continued from page 252)

Woodcarvings are also a local speciality. Cross Cam Nam Bridge to Cam Nam Village, to watch the carvers at work. Woodcarving is a speciality on Cam Kim Island (see right).

Vietnam has a great reputation for its ceramics, and while much of what is on sale here comes from around Hanoi, it is worth stocking up if you are only visiting central Vietnam. The black pottery with a glassy glaze is particularly striking. It's best to browse the strip of small **ceramics shops** (Đ Bach Dang) along the riverfront.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The closest airport is 45 minutes away, in Danang (see p234).

BUS

The main **Hoi An bus station** (☎ 861 284; 96 Đ Hung Vuong) is 1km west of the centre of town. Buses from here go to Danang (8000d, one hour), Quang Ngai and other points. More frequent services to Danang leave from the **northern bus station** (Đ Le Hong Phong) from 5am until the late afternoon.

A regular stop on the open-bus route, it's easy to pick up a service to or from Hué (US\$3, four hours) or Nha Trang (US\$6 to US\$8, 11 to 12 hours).

CAR & MOTORBIKE

To get to Danang (30km) you can either head north out of town and join up with Hwy 1A, or east to Cua Dai Beach and follow the excellent new road along China Beach. The going rate for a motorbike taxi between Danang and Hoi An is US\$4 to US\$6. A taxi costs around US\$10.

Shop around for rates on car hire. A journey to Hué can vary from US\$35 to US\$70. A day trip around the surrounding area, including My Son, is about for US\$15 to US\$20. Agree on your itinerary in advance and get a copy in writing.

Getting Around

Anywhere within town can be reached on foot. To go further afield, rent a bicycle from 10,000d per day – check with your hotel as it may provide them free. Cross the An Hoi Footbridge for a pleasant walk or ride through attractive rural countryside. A motorbike without/

with a driver will cost around US\$6/10 per day. Hire places are located all over town.

A taxi to the beach costs a couple of dollars.

BOAT

A boat trip on the Thu Bon River can be a fascinating experience. A simple rowing boat, complete with rower, costs something like US\$2 per hour, and one hour is probably long enough for most travellers. Some My Son tours offer part of the journey by boat – a lovely but lengthy voyage.

Boats that carry up to five people can be hired to visit handicraft and fishing villages in the area; expect to pay around US\$4 per hour. Look for the boats near the dock close to the market.

AROUND HOI AN Cam Kim Island

The master woodcarvers, who in previous centuries produced the fine carvings that graced the homes of Hoi An's merchants and the town's public buildings, came from Kim Bong Village on Cam Kim Island. Most of the woodcarvings on sale in Hoi An are produced here.

To reach the island, catch one of the boats that leave from the boat landing at Đ Hoang Van Thu in Hoi An (10,000d, one hour).

Cham Island

Cham Island is 21km from Hoi An in the South China Sea. The island is famous as a source of swiftlet nests (see p295). It's also part of the Cu Lao Cham Marine Park – comprising eight islands, it's home to 155 species of coral, 202 species of fish, four species of lobster and 84 species of mollusc. Diving trips can be arranged through Rainbow Divers (see p239).

Permits are needed to visit Cham Island, which still houses a naval base. Public boats leave from the landing on Đ Bach Dang in Hoi An between 7am and 8am and the one-way journey takes three hours, but it's difficult for foreigners to organise the paperwork to travel on one of these boats. It's easiest to book with a travel agency – a day trip costs 18,000d, while an overnigher staying in tents on the beach is around 35,000d. These tours are heavily dependent on the weather.

Thanh Ha

Not so long ago there were many pottery factories in this village, 3km west of Hoi An, but

CRAVING THAT PERFECT FIT

Caution – having clothes made in Hoi An is extremely addictive. You may be able to walk past the first few tailor stores without wavering, but given that you're likely to pass dozens every day you spend here, chances are you'll eventually crack. And when you do, watch out. It's not unusual to see even hardened blokes gleefully ploughing through fabric rolls, trying to pick the perfect satin lining for that second new suit.

Hoi An's numerous tailors can make anything and usually within a day. They're master copiers – bring in an item of clothing you want duplicated or a picture in a magazine, pick out your fabric, and the next day your vision will be brought to life. Many have current fashion catalogues to leaf through. They're also extremely skilled in the art of flattering and pampering. A fitting session can do wonders for the ego – 'You look so good in that...why not buy another one?'

Bargaining has a place here, but basically you get what you pay for. The better tailors and better fabrics are more expensive. One of the hundreds of tailors will probably knock out a men's suit for US\$20, but a good-quality, lined woollen suit is more likely to cost US\$40 to US\$70. Shirts, skirts and casual trousers hover around the US\$10 mark.

The trick is to pick a shop you're comfortable with, know your fabrics, check in advance on the details (thread colour, linings and buttons) and allow plenty of time for fittings and adjustments.

When buying silk, it's important to ascertain that it's real and not a synthetic imitation. The only real test is with a cigarette or match (synthetic fibres melt and silk burns), but try not to set the shop on fire. If you're concerned about its authenticity ask for a cut-off sample of the material and go outside to test it. Similarly, don't accept on face value that a fabric is 100% cotton or wool without giving it a good feel and ensuring you're happy with the quality.

Remember to check the seams of the finished garment: a single set of stitching along the inside edges will soon cause fraying and, in many cases, big gaping holes. All well-tailored garments have a second set of stitches (known in the trade as blanket stitching), which binds the edge, oversewing the fabric so fraying is impossible. Where possible, also insist on the clothes being lined, as it helps them move and fall in the right direction.

There are so many tailors that it's difficult to single out individual stores for mention, and impossible (although tempting) to test them all out. Most use a range of outsourced workers who can vary in quality. If you're planning on getting a lot of stuff made, consider trying out a couple of shops with small items before taking the plunge on your wedding dress. That said, some places we're heard good things about are **Phuoc An** (☎ 862 615; 6 Đ Le Loi), **Yaly** (☎ 910 474; 47 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc), **A Dong Silk** (☎ 861 386; www.adongsilk.com; 40 Đ Le Loi) and **Faifoo** (☎ 862 566; Đ Tran Hung Dao).

the industry has been in decline. The remaining artisans employed in this hot and sweaty work don't mind if you stop for a gander, though they're happier if you buy something. Many tours to My Son visit here on the way back to Hoi An. For a more personalised experience, contact **Mr Trung** (☎ 922 695), a villager who arranges day tours, including lunch and transport, for around US\$10.

MY SON

Set within the jungle 55km from Hoi An are the enigmatic ruins of **My Son** (☎ 731 309; admission 60,000đ; ☎ 6.30am-4pm), the most important remains of the ancient kingdom of Champa and a Unesco World Heritage site. Although Vietnam has better preserved Cham sites, none are as extensive and few have such

beautiful surroundings – in a verdant valley surrounded by hills and overlooked by Cat's Tooth Mountain (Hon Quap). Clear streams run between the structures and past nearby coffee plantations.

During the centuries when Tra Kieu (which was then known as Simhapura) served as the political capital, My Son was the most important intellectual and religious centre, and may also have served as a burial place for Cham monarchs.

My Son is considered to be Champa's smaller version of the grand cities of Southeast Asia's other Indian-influenced civilisations: Angkor (Cambodia), Ayu-thaya (Thailand), Bagan (Myanmar) and Borobudur (Java). American bombs have reduced many of the towers to ruins, but there's still plenty to see.

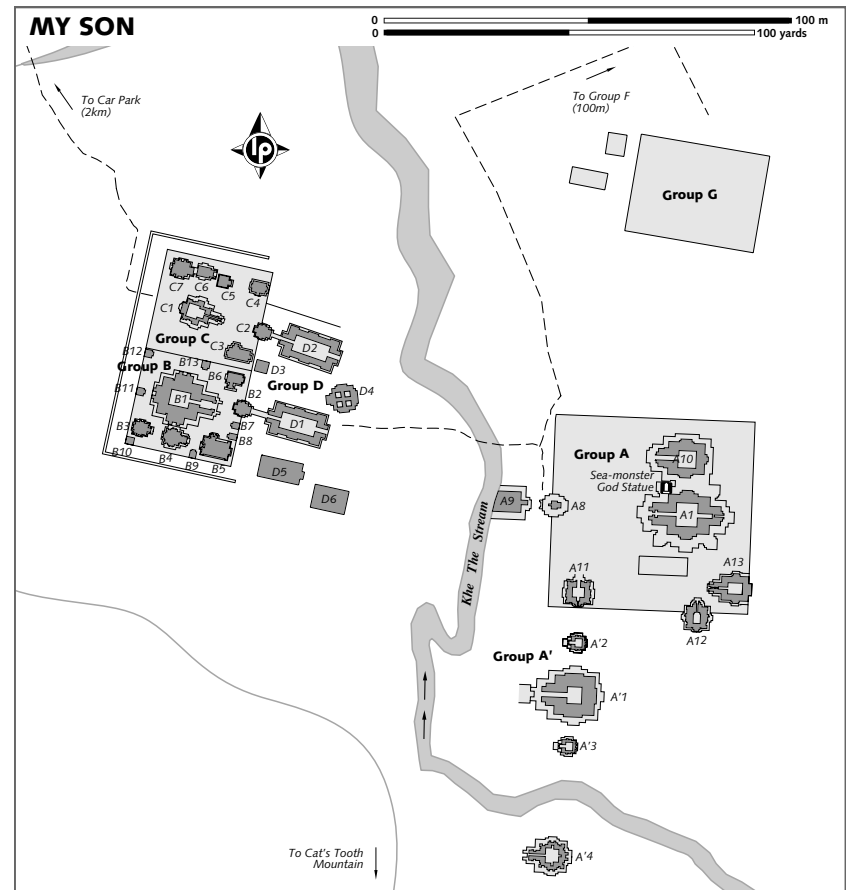
History

My Son (pronounced 'me sun') became a religious centre under King Bhadravarman in the late 4th century and was constantly occupied until the 13th century – the longest period of development of any monument in Southeast Asia. Most of the temples were dedicated to Cham kings associated with divinities, particularly Shiva, who was regarded as the founder and protector of Champa's dynasties.

Champa's contact with Java was extensive. Cham scholars were sent to Java to study and there was a great deal of commerce between the two empires – Cham pottery has been found on Java and, in the 12th century, the Cham king wed a Javanese woman.

Because some of the ornamentation work at My Son was never finished, archaeologists know that the Chams first built their structures and only then carved decorations into the brickwork. Researchers have yet to figure out for certain how they managed to get the baked bricks to stick together. According to one theory, they used a paste prepared with a botanical oil that is indigenous to central Vietnam. During one period in their history, the summits of some of the towers were completely covered with a layer of gold.

During the American War this region was completely devastated and depopulated in extended bitter fighting. Finding it to be a convenient staging ground, the VC used My Son as a base; in response the Americans



bombed the monuments. Traces of 68 structures have been found, of which 25 survived repeated pillaging in previous centuries by the Chinese, Khmer and Vietnamese. The American bombing failed to destroy about 20 of these, although some sustained extensive damage. Today, Vietnamese authorities are attempting to restore as much as possible of the remaining sites.

Information

The entry fee includes local transport from the parking area to the sites, about 2km away. By departing from Hoi An at about 5am, you will arrive to wake up the gods (and the guards) for sunrise and could be leaving just as the four groups reach the area. It gets very busy at My Son; go early or late to soak up the atmosphere in relative peace and quiet.

The Site

Past the ticket office you will find the large new **Exhibition Buildings**, containing Sanskrit-inscribed stones as well as panels outlining historical facts on topics including the hairstyles of Cham women. Take time to look at the large map of the site. The complex includes toilets and a souvenir shop.

Archaeologists have divided My Son's monuments into 10 main groups, uninspiringly named A, A', B, C, D, E, F, G, H and K – with each structure within that group given a number.

GROUP C

The 8th-century **C1** was used to worship Shiva, portrayed in human form (rather than in the form of a *linga*, as in B1). Inside is an altar where a statue of Shiva, now in the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang, used to stand. On either side of the stone doorway it's possible to see the holes in which two wooden doors once swung. Note the motifs, characteristic of the 8th century, carved into the brickwork of the exterior walls. With the massive bomb crater in front of this group, it's amazing that anything's still standing.

GROUP B

The main *kalan* (sanctuary), **B1**, was dedicated to Bhadresvara, which is a contraction of the name of King Bhadravarman, who built the first temple at My Son, combined with '-esvara', which means Shiva. The first building on this site was erected in the 4th century, destroyed in the 6th century and then again rebuilt in the 7th century. Only the 11th-century base, made of large sandstone blocks, remains – the brickwork walls have disappeared. The niches in the wall were used to hold lamps (Cham sanctuaries had no windows). The *linga* inside was discovered during excavations in 1985, 1m below its current position.

B5, built in the 10th century, was used for storing sacred books and objects used in ceremonies performed in B1. The boat-shaped roof (the 'bow' and 'stern' have fallen off) demon-

strates the influence of Malayo-Polynesian architecture. Unlike the sanctuaries, this building has windows and the Cham masonry inside is original. Over the window on the outside wall facing B4 is a brick bas-relief of two elephants under a tree with two birds in it.

The ornamentation on the exterior walls of **B4** is an excellent example of a Cham decorative style, typical of the 9th century and said to resemble worms. This style is unlike anything found in other Southeast Asian cultures.

B3 has an Indian-influenced pyramidal roof typical of Cham towers. Inside **B6** is a bath-shaped basin for keeping sacred water that was poured over the *linga* in B1; this is the only known example of a Cham basin. **B2** is a gate.

Around the perimeter of Group B are small temples, **B7** to **B13**, dedicated to the gods of the directions of the compass (*dikpalaka*).

GROUP D

Buildings **D1** and **D2**, which were once meditation halls, now house small displays of Cham sculpture.

GROUP A

The path from Groups B, C and D to Group A leads eastward from near D4.

Group A was almost completely destroyed by US attacks. According to locals, massive **A1**, considered the most important monument at My Son, remained impervious to aerial bombing and was intentionally finished off by a helicopter-borne sapper team. All that remains today is a pile of collapsed brick walls. After the destruction of A1, Philippe Stern, an expert on Cham art and curator of the Guimet Museum in Paris, wrote a letter of protest to the US president Nixon, who ordered US forces to continue killing the VC, but not to do any further damage to Cham monuments.

A1 was the only Cham sanctuary with two doors. One faced east, in the direction of the Hindu gods; the other faced west towards Groups B, C and D and the spirits of the ancestor kings reputedly buried there. Inside A1 is a stone altar. Among the ruins, some of the brilliant brickwork, (typical 10th-century style) is still visible. At the base of A1 on the side facing A10 (decorated in 9th-century style) is a carving of a worshipping figure flanked by round columns, with a Javanese sea-monster god (*kala-makara*) above. There are plans to partially restore A1 and A10 in the future.

IS THAT WHAT I THINK IT IS?

Yes, it's a giant stone penis.

A common sight around Cham temples, these *linga* have an important spiritual value, symbolising the God Shiva. You'll often find them on a square base with a channel cut through it, a *yoni*, which represents female genitalia. An important Cham religious practice at My Son saw priests heading up to Cat's Tooth Mountain (where Shiva was believed to reside) to retrieve water from a sacred stream. This was then ceremonially poured over the head of the *linga*, draining out through the spout of the *yoni*.

OTHER GROUPS

Dating from the 8th century, **Group A'** is at present overgrown and inaccessible. Similarly off-limits, **Group G**, which has been damaged by time rather than war, dates from the 12th century. **Group E** was built from the 8th to 11th centuries, while **Group F** dates from the 8th century. Both were badly bombed and parts are propped up by scaffolding. There are statues scattered around, including a female figure without a head (perfect for those comedy photos), another *linga*, an oxen and several stone tablets scarred by shell holes.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Garden (☎ 734 028; thanhphongltd@dng.vnn.vn; s/d 200,000/300,000d) If you're serious about beating the crowds and don't quite believe that 5.30am exists except at the end of a hard night, it's possible to stay right at My Son's gates. This complex offers a number of bungalows scattered around an attractive garden. There's also a large restaurant and a café on site.

Getting There & Away

CAR

A hire car with driver from Hoi An to My Son costs around US\$15 to US\$20. Going under your own steam gives you the option of arriving before or after the tour groups, and My Son is quite atmospheric when you're one of only a few people there.

BUS/MINIBUS

Numerous hotels in Hoi An can book a day trip to My Son that includes a stop-off at Tra Kieu. At US\$2 to US\$3 per person, you could hardly do it cheaper unless you walked. The

KINGDOM OF CHAMPA

The kingdom of Champa flourished from the 2nd to the 15th centuries. It first appeared around present-day Danang and later spread south to what is now Nha Trang and Phan Rang. Champa became Indianised through commercial ties: adopting Hinduism, using Sanskrit as a sacred language and borrowing from Indian art.

The Chams, who lacked enough land for agriculture, were semi-piratical and conducted attacks on passing trade ships. As a result they were in a constant state of war with the Vietnamese to the north and the Khmers to the southwest. The Chams successfully threw off Khmer rule in the 12th century, but were entirely absorbed by Vietnam in the 17th century.

The Chams are best known for the many brick sanctuaries (Cham towers) they constructed throughout the south. The greatest collection of Cham art is in the Museum of Cham Sculpture (p231) in Danang. The major Cham site is at My Son (p262), and other Cham ruins can be found in Quy Nhon (p274) and its surrounds (p277), Tuy Hoa (p279), Nha Trang (p283), Thap Cham (p296) and Mui Ne (p301).

The Cham remain a substantial ethnic minority in Vietnam, particularly around Phan Rang, numbering around 100,000 people. Elements of Cham civilisation can still be seen in techniques for pottery, fishing, sugar production, rice farming, irrigation, silk production and construction throughout the coast. While over 80% of the remaining Cham population are Muslim, the rest have remained Hindu, and many of their ancient towers in the south are still active temples.

minibuses depart from Hoi An at 8am and return at 1pm. Some agencies offer the option of returning to Hoi An by boat, which adds an extra couple of hours to the trip.

MOTORBIKE

It's possible to get to the sites by rented motorbike. Make sure you park in the official parking area. Otherwise, get somebody else to drive you on their motorbike and then ask them to wait for you.

TRA KIEU (SIMHAPURA)

Formerly called Simhapura (Lion Citadel), Tra Kieu was the first capital city of Champa, serving in that capacity from the 4th to the 8th centuries. Today nothing remains of the ancient city except the rectangular ramparts. A large number of artefacts, including some of the finest carvings in the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang (p231), were found here.

Mountain Church

You can get a wonderful view of the city's outlines and the surrounding countryside from the **Mountain Church** (Nha Tho Nui), on the top of Buu Chau Hill. This modern, open-air structure was built in 1970 to replace an earlier church destroyed by an American bomb. A Cham tower once stood on this spot. It's worth visiting the little shop at the bottom of the hill to look at a picture of the site in antiquity and peruse its collection of small artefacts.

The Mountain Church is 6.5km from Hwy 1A and 19.5km from My Son. Within Tra Kieu, it is 200m from the morning **market**, Cho Tra Kieu, and 550m from Tra Kieu Church.

Tra Kieu Church

This **church** (Dia So Tra Kieu), which serves the town's Catholic population of 3000, was built in the late 19th century. There's a fantastic ceramic mosaic dragon on the external stairs. A priest from here, who died in 1988, was interested in the Cham civilisation and amassed a collection of artefacts found by local people. A 2nd-floor room in the building to the right of the church opened as a **museum** in 1990. The round ceramic objects with faces on them, which date from the 8th and 10th centuries, were affixed to the ends of tiled roofs. The face is of Kala, the God of Time.

According to local belief this church was the site of a miracle in 1885, witnessed by 80 people. At that time, when the Catholic

villagers were under attack by anti-French forces, a vision of a lady in white, believed to be Mary the mother of Jesus, appeared on the top of the church. At the end of a 21-day siege during which 500 shells were fired on the village, the church and those who had sheltered in it remained unharmed. While not officially recognised by the Catholic Church, this is a popular site for Vietnamese pilgrims. The original Mountain Church (see left) was built to commemorate this event – although it didn't achieve such divine protection itself during the American War.

Tra Kieu Church is 7km from Hwy 1A and 19km from My Son. It is down a street opposite the town's **Clinic of Western Medicine** (Quay Thuoc Tay Y). Expect to stop for directions.

Getting There & Away

Many day trips to My Son from Hoi An include a stop-off at Tra Kieu. Otherwise you'll need to rent a bike or a car and driver (see p261).

TAM KY

Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Nam province, is a nondescript town on the highway between Quang Ngai and Danang. However, the nearby Cham towers of **Chien Dan** (Chien Dan Cham; Hwy 1A; admission 10,000d; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) are wonderful.

In a pleasant rural setting, few tourists venture here. Chances are you'll be left alone to explore the three towers and small sculpture museum. Although they escaped the bombing that My Son endured, scars from the American War are evident. The eerie feel of the interior of the middle tower is heightened by the numerous bullet holes in the wall – many people died here.

Dating from the 11th or 12th century, each *kalan* (sanctuary) faces east. Many of the decorative friezes remain on the outside walls. The middle tower was dedicated to Shiva; at the front left-hand edge of its base there are carvings of dancing girls and a fight scene. Look for the grinning faces high up between this and the left tower (honouring Brahma) and the two elephants at the rear. The right-hand tower is dedicated to Vishnu.

The site is visible to the right of the road on your approach to Tam Ky, 47km south of Hoi An (5km north of Tam Ky). It will take about 50 minutes to reach by car, and can easily be combined with a trip to My Son.

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