



Ho Chi Minh City

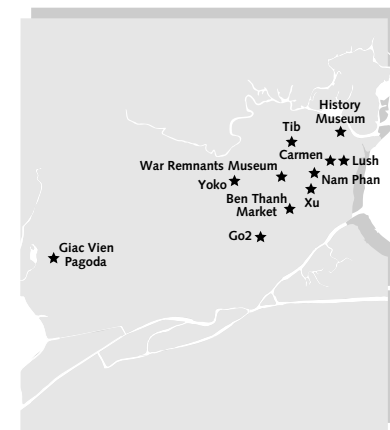
Boasting an electric, near palpable energy, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is Vietnam's largest metropolis and its undisputed capital of commerce. For the casual visitor, Saigon – as its still called by all but the city officials who live here – can seem a chaotic mess of traffic-clogged roads and urban bustle, with nary a green space in sight. Yet thousands of expats and Vietnamese immigrants couldn't imagine living anywhere else. They've long since fallen prey to the hidden charms of one of Southeast Asia's liveliest cities.

If every town had a symbol, Saigon's would surely be the motorbike. More than three million of them fly along streets once swarming with bicycles. Cruising along boulevards and back alleys astride a *xe om* (motorbike taxi) is the quickest way to sensory overload – daily fare in this tropical town. Teeming markets, sidewalk cafés, massage and acupuncture clinics, centuries-old pagodas, sleek skyscrapers and ramshackle wooden shops selling silk, spices, baskets and handmade furniture all jockey for attention amid the surreal urban collage.

Saigon is a forward-looking city driving Vietnam's economic boom. Investment has led to new crop of lavish hotels and restaurants, with trendy nightclubs and high-end boutiques dotting tree-lined neighbourhoods. Yet the city hasn't forgotten its past. The ghosts live on in the churches, temples, former GI hotels and government buildings that one generation ago witnessed a city in turmoil. The Saigon experience is about so many things – magical conversations, memorable meals and inevitable frustration – yet it's unlikely to evoke apathy. Stick around this complicated city long enough and you may find yourself smitten by it.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rediscover the past at the **History Museum** (p341) and the **War Remnants Museum** (p340)
- Explore the pagodas of colourful Cholon (p345), before heading to the fantastically atmospheric **Giac Vien Pagoda** (p349)
- Feast at **Xu** (p362), **Nam Phan** (p362), **Tib** (p362), or a dozen other decadent restaurants
- Watch the world spin by at some of the country's best open-air **cafés** (see Motorbike Melody, p368)
- Drink the southern nightlife scene at **Lush** (p367), **Carmen** (p367) or **Yoko** (p367).
- Unearth hidden treasures at **Ben Thanh Market** (p372)
- Go bar-hopping along Đ De Tham, then dance till dawn at nearby **Go2** (p369)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 08

■ POPULATION: 6.3 MILLION

■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOV-FEB

HISTORY

The Nguyen dynasty's Saigon was captured by the French in 1859, becoming the capital of the French colony of Cochinchina a few years later. The city served as the capital of the Republic of Vietnam from 1956 until 1975, when it fell to advancing North Vietnamese forces and was renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the Hanoi government.

Nowadays, the official government census counts only those who have official residence permits, and probably a third of the population lives here illegally. Many of these illegal residents actually lived in the city before 1975, but their residence permits were transferred to rural re-education camps after reunification. Not surprisingly, they and their families have simply sneaked back into the city, although without a residence permit they cannot own property or a business.

Explosive growth, part of the effect of *doi moi* (economic reform) in 1986, is evident in new high-rise buildings, joint-venture hotels and colourful shops. Downsides include the sharp increase in traffic, pollution and other urban ills, but a more open-minded new gen-

eration may infuse HCMC's chaotic growth with a more globally conscious attitude.

ORIENTATION

In actuality, HCMC is not so much a city as a small province stretching from the South China Sea almost to the Cambodian border. Rural regions make up about 90% of the land area of HCMC and hold around 25% of the municipality's population; the other 75% is crammed into the remaining 10% of land, which constitutes the urban centre.

HCMC is divided into 16 urban districts (*quan*, derived from the French *quartier*) and five rural districts (*huyen*).

To the west of Saigon and the city centre is District 5, the huge Chinese neighbourhood called Cholon, which means 'Big Market'. However, it is decidedly less Chinese than it used to be, largely thanks to the anticapitalist and anti-Chinese campaign from 1978 to 1979, when many ethnic Chinese fled the country – taking with them their money and entrepreneurial skills. Many of these refugees have since returned (with foreign passports) to explore investment possibilities, and

RENAMING THE PAST

One of the main battlegrounds for the hearts of Vietnamese during the last four decades has been the naming of Vietnam's provinces, districts, cities, towns, streets and institutions. Some places have borne three or more names since WWII and, often, more than one name is still used.

When French control of Vietnam ended in 1954, almost all French names were replaced in both the North and the South. For example, Saigon's Rue Catinat – a familiar name to anyone who's read Graham Greene's *A Quiet American* – was renamed Đ Tu Do (Freedom); since reunification it has been known as Đ Dong Khoi (Uprising). Later, in 1956, the US-backed puppet regime changed the names of some provinces and towns in the South in an effort to erase from popular memory the Viet Minh's anti-French exploits, which were often known by the places in which they occurred. The village-based southern communists, who by this time had gone underground, continued to use the old designations and boundaries in running their regional and local organisations. The peasants – now faced with two masters – quickly adapted to this situation, using one set of place names when dealing with the communists and a different set of names when talking to South Vietnamese officials.

After reunification, the first task of Saigon's provisional government was to rename the southern capital Ho Chi Minh City, a decision confirmed in Hanoi a year later. The new government began changing street names considered inappropriate – an ongoing process – dropping English and French names in favour of Vietnamese ones. The only French names still in use are those of Albert Calmette (1893–1934), developer of a tuberculosis vaccine; Marie Curie (1867–1934), who won the Nobel Prize for her research into radioactivity; Louis Pasteur (1822–95), chemist and bacteriologist; and Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943), discoverer of the plague bacillus.

Despite the current attempts at renaming (like in 2000, when the Municipal People's Committee renamed over 150 streets), the most important streets are unlikely to change names. Some even resist officialdom's intrusion into the rename game. Saigon, after all, is still the preferred name for the majority of southerners who live there.

HO CHI MINH CITY IN...

One Day

Start your morning with a steaming bowl of *pho* (rice-noodle soup), followed by a stroll among the shops and galleries lining Đ Dong Khoi. Make your way to the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (p341), then have lunch at nearby **Quan An Ngoc** (p361), the place to sample a wide variety of Vietnamese delicacies. Continue your journey into the past at the **Reunification Palace** (p339) and the **War Remnants Museum** (p340). In the evening, catch the sunset and stunning views from the rooftop bar of the **Sheraton Saigon** (p360), followed by an elegant meal at either **Temple Club** (p362) or **Nam Phan** (p362). Have a nightcap at **Qing** (p367), a small cosy wine bar.

Two Days

Begin the day at the lively **Ben Thanh Market** (p372), where you can grab a bite while loading up on wooden knick-knacks, sweets and conical hats. Then, grab a taxi to **Cholon** (p345) for a visit to the historic pagodas of HCMC's Chinatown. Have lunch, then pay a final pagoda visit to **Giac Lam** (p348), HCMC's oldest and arguably most impressive pagoda. As the afternoon wanes, treat yourself to a massage or spa treatment at **L'Apothiquaire** (p353), a welcome reward for tired gamers. After detoxifying, start the fun all over again with a decadent meal at **Tib** (p362) or **Lemon Grass** (p362). End the night at one of HCMC's stylish bars, such as **Lush** (p367) or **Yoko** (p367).

Cholon's hotels are once again packed with Chinese-speaking businesspeople.

The city's neoclassical and international-style buildings, along with its tree-lined streets set with shops, cafés and restaurants give neighbourhoods such as District 3 an attractive, vaguely French atmosphere. The majority of places and sights described in this chapter are located in District 1, which includes the backpacker district of Pham Ngu Lao, and the tonier area of Dong Khoi, which hosts the city's best assortment of restaurants, bars and boutiques.

The 7km trip into town from the airport should cost around 70,000d in a metered taxi, or about 50,000d by motorbike taxi (*xe om*). You could also try the airport bus (1000d) that drops you right in central HCMC (see p374). From the train station (Ga Sai Gon; p374), a *xe om* to Pham Ngu Lao costs about 15,000d. Most *xe om* rides from Saigon's intercity bus stations will run between 10,000d to 20,000d; public buses also pass by the central Ben Thanh Market (3000d), but these usually stop running midafternoon. Open-tour buses will unload you directly into Pham Ngu Lao.

Maps

Good, up-to-date maps of HCMC are available at bookstores in Districts 1 and 3; a reliable, central source is Fahasa Bookshop (see right).

INFORMATION

Bookshops

The best area to look for maps, books and stationery is along the north side of Đ Le Loi, between the Rex Hotel and Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, in the Dong Khoi area (Map p350). There are many small, privately run shops as well as the large government-run ones.

On Đ De Tham, around Pham Ngu Lao (Map p357), there is a handful of shops dealing in used paperbacks (for purchase or trade) and bootleg CDs. Vendors on foot sell pirated paperbacks everywhere in Pham Ngu Lao.

Fahasa Bookshop (Map p350; ☎ 8am–10pm); Đ Dong Khoi (☎ 822 4670; 185 Đ Dong Khoi); Đ Nguyen Hue (☎ 822 5796; 40 Đ Nguyen Hue) One of the best government-run bookshops, with good dictionaries, maps and general books in English and French.

Phuong Nam Bookshop (Map p336; ☎ 822 9650; 2A Đ Le Duan; ☎ 8am–9.30pm) Has imported books and magazines in English, French and Chinese, mostly instructional.

Cultural Centres

British Council (Map p336; ☎ 823 2862; www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam; 25 Đ Le Duan)

Institute of Cultural Exchange with France (Idecaf; Map p350; ☎ 829 5451; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung)

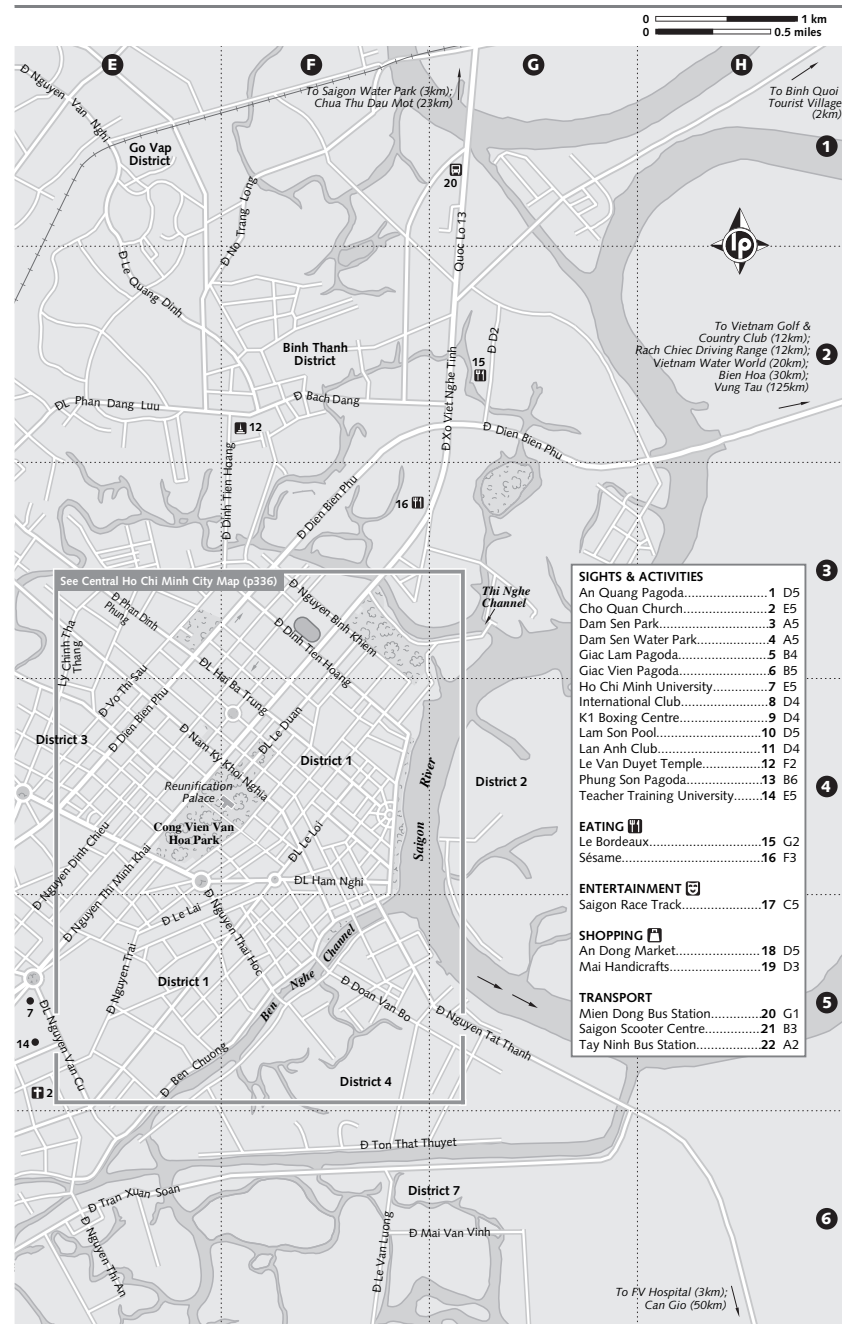
Emergency

Emergency (☎ 115)

Fire (☎ 114)

Information (☎ 1080)

Police (☎ 113)



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exchange traveller's cheques, charging less commission when exchanging for dong. Try the following.

ANZ Bank (Map p350; ☎ 829 9319; 11 Me Linh Sq) Has a 24-hour ATM.

HSBC (Map p350; ☎ 829 2288; 235 Đ Dong Khoi) With secure 24-hour ATM.

Sacombank (Map p357; ☎ 836 4231; www.sacombank.com; 211 Đ Nguyen Thai Hoc) Conveniently located in the budget-traveller zone, with 24-hour ATM.

Vietcombank (Map p336; ☎ 829 7245; 29 Đ Ben Chuong; ☎ closed Sun & last day of the month) The eastern building is for foreign exchange only, but is also worth a visit just to see the stunningly ornate interior. There are also branches in **Dong Khoi area** (Map p350; 19 Lam Son Sq).

Post

HCMC's French-style **main post office** (Map p350; ☎ 829 6555; 2 Cong Xa Paris; ☎ 7am-9.30pm), with its glass canopy and iron frame, is right next to Notre Dame Cathedral. Built between 1886 and 1891, it is the largest post office in Vietnam and worth visiting just for its architecture.

Customers conduct their post and telecommunications business here under the benevolent gaze of Ho Chi Minh. To your right as you enter the building is the poste restante counter. Pens, envelopes, aerograms, postcards and stamp collections are sold at the counter to the right of the entrance, and outside the post office along Đ Nguyen Du.

Countless other post office branches are scattered around town, see Map p357 and Map p346 for locations. Like the main post office, many of these also keep late hours.

The following private carriers operate near the main post office:

DHL (Map p350; ☎ 823 1525; 2 Cong Xa Paris; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Federal Express (Map p350; ☎ 829 0995; www.fedex.com; 146 Đ Pasteur; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-2pm Sat)

Saigon Logistics (Map p357; ☎ 837 3435; www.saigonlogistics.com.vn; 293 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Deals in freight forwarding, if you've out-shopped yourself.

Telephone

International and domestic phone calls can be made from post offices and better hotels. At the post office local calls cost 2000d; hotel prices for local calls vary, so be sure to ask the price beforehand.

International calls can also be made over the internet at most internet cafés; rates start at around 5000d per minute, though you can

call for free (computer to computer) through Skype (www.skype.com).

Tourist Information

Sasco (☎ 848 7142; www.sascotravel.com.vn; ☎ 9am-11pm) Just beyond the baggage carousels, Sasco's Visitors Information & Services counter offers free city maps, tourist literature and an airport timetable, plus transport, accommodation and tour bookings.

Tourist Information Center (Map p350; ☎ 822 6033; www.vntourists.com; 4G Le Loi; ☎ 8am-8pm) This sleek, new information centre, which opened in 2006, distributes city maps and brochures and can give limited advice about goings-on in Saigon. There's also a tour operator and currency exchange here.

Travel Agencies

HCMC's official government-run travel agency is **Saigon Tourist** (Map p350; ☎ 829 8914; www.saigontourist.net; 49 Đ Le Thanh Ton; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1-5.30pm). The agency owns, or is a joint-venture partner in, more than 70 hotels and numerous restaurants around town, plus a car-rental agency, golf clubs and assorted tourist traps.

There's a plethora of other travel agencies in town, virtually all of them joint ventures between government agencies and private companies. These places can provide cars, book air tickets and extend your visa. Competition is keen and you can often undercut Saigon Tourist's tariffs by 50% if you shop around. Many agencies have multilingual guides who speak English, French, Japanese etc.

Most tour guides and drivers are paid poorly, so if you're happy with their service, consider tipping them. Many travellers on bus tours to Cu Chi or the Mekong Delta, for example, collect a kitty (say US\$1 or US\$2 per person) and give it to the guide and driver at the end of the trip.

We suggest visiting several tour operators to see what's being offered to suit your taste and budget. Plenty of cheap tours – of varying quality – are sold around Pham Ngu Lao. One excellent appraisal strategy is to grill other travellers who've just returned from a tour.

Another appealing option is to arrange a customised private tour with your own car, driver and guide. Travelling this way provides maximum flexibility and split between a few people can be surprisingly affordable.

For customised tours, **Sinhbalo Adventures** (Map p357; ☎ 837 6766, 836 7682; www.sinhbalo.com; 283/20 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) is one of the best in Viet-

nam. Sinhbalo specialises in cycling trips, but also arranges innovative special-interest journeys to the Mekong Delta, central highlands and further afield. Its programmes range from remote hill-tribe trekking and bird-watching in national parks to motorbiking the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We've been using them for more than 10 years and have yet to hit a snag.

The well rated Hanoi-based **Handspan Adventure Travel** (Map p350; ☎ 925 7605; www.handspan.com; 7th fl, Titan Bldg, 18A Đ Nam Quoc Cang) recently opened a branch office in Ho Chi Minh City and also deserves special mention for their quality tours.

Although your experience will very much depend on your guide, current favourites among budget agencies listed below are Kim Travel, Sinh Café and TNK Travel; see p490 for more options.

BUDGET AGENCIES

Delta Adventure Tours (Map p357; ☎ 920 2112; www.deltaadventuretours.com; 267 Đ De Tham)

Innoviet (Map p357; ☎ 295 8840; www.innoviet.com; 158 Đ Bui Vien)

Kim Travel (Map p357; ☎ 920 5552; www.kimtravel.com; 270 Đ De Tham)

Linh Cafe (Map p357; ☎ 836 0643; www.linhtravelvn.com; 291 Đ Pham Ngu Lao)

Mekong Tours (Map p357; ☎ 837 6429; mekongtours@hotmail.com; 272 Đ De Tham)

Sinh Café (Map p357; ☎ 836 7338; www.sinhcafevn.com; 246 Đ De Tham; ☎ 6.30am-11pm)

TNK Travel (Map p350; ☎ 920 4766; www.tnktravelvietnam.com; 216 Đ De Tham)

MIDRANGE & TOP-END AGENCIES

Asiana Travel Mate (Map p350; ☎ 825 0615; www.asianatravelmate.com; 46 Đ Le Loi)

Buffalo Tours (Map p350; ☎ 827 9170; www.buffalotours.com; Majestic Hotel, 1 Đ Dong Khoi)

Exotissimo (Map p336; ☎ 825 1723; www.exotissimo.com; Saigon Trade Centre, 37 Ton Duc Thang)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

HCMC is the most theft-ridden city in Vietnam; don't become a statistic. See p466 for advice on how to avoid street crime. Be especially careful along the Saigon riverfront, where motorbike 'cowboys' operate.

Scams

One of the more common rip-offs in HCMC involves *cyclo* drivers demanding exorbitant sums at the end of a tour.

Rather than hopping blithely into the seat when the driver smilingly says, 'Price up to you,' clearly negotiate a fair price up front (consider 100,000/200,000d for a half-day/full-day tour). If more than one person is travelling make sure you're negotiating the price for both and not a per-passenger fee. It sometimes pays to sketch out numbers and pictures with pen and paper so all parties agree. Unfortunately, 'misunderstandings' do happen; unless the *cyclo* driver has pedalled you to the 21 districts of HCMC, US\$25 is not the going rate.

That said, don't just assume the driver is trying to bamboozle you. It's a tough living, especially as the city government tries to phase out the *cyclos* entirely. If you've had a particularly great guide and ride, tip generously.

SIGHTS

Although HCMC lacks the obvious aesthetic virtues of its rival to the north, the city provides some fascinating sights for the wanderer, from little-visited pagodas hidden down quiet lanes to museums, historic sites and teeming markets all jumbled up in the chaotic urban scene. First-time visitors often focus exclusively on District 1, where many of the sights are found. Those with more than a day in the city can take in central HCMC, the pagodas in Cholon and further afield, leaving enough time to explore the intriguing side of Saigon – like an afternoon at an amusement park or the racetrack.

Central Area

REUNIFICATION PALACE

Striking modern architecture and the eerie feeling you get as you walk through its deserted halls make **Reunification Palace** (Dinh Thong Nhat; Map p336; ☎ 829 4117; 106 Đ Nguyen Du; admission 15,000d; ☎ 7.30-11am & 1-4pm) one of the most fascinating sights in HCMC. The building, once the symbol of the South Vietnamese government, is preserved almost as it was on that day in April 1975 when the Republic of Vietnam, which hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and 58,183 Americans had died trying to save, ceased to exist. Some recent additions include a statue of Ho Chi Minh and a viewing room where you can watch a video about Vietnamese history in a variety of languages. The national anthem is played at the end of the tape and you are expected to stand up – it would be rude not to.

It was towards this building – then known as Independence Palace or the Presidential Palace – that the first communist tanks to arrive in Saigon charged on the morning of 30 April 1975. After crashing through the wrought-iron gates – in a dramatic scene recorded by photojournalists and shown around the world – a soldier ran into the building and up the stairs to unfurl a VC flag from the 4th-floor balcony. In an ornate 2nd-floor reception chamber, General Minh, who had become head of state only 43 hours before, waited with his improvised cabinet. ‘I have been waiting since early this morning to transfer power to you’, Minh said to the VC officer who entered the room. ‘There is no question of your transferring power’, replied the officer. ‘You cannot give up what you do not have.’

In 1868 a residence was built on this site for the French governor-general of Cochinchina and gradually it expanded to become Norodom Palace. When the French departed, the palace became home for South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm. So hated was Diệm that his own air force bombed the palace in 1962 in an unsuccessful attempt to kill him. The president ordered a new residence to be built on the same site, this time with a sizeable bomb shelter in the basement. Work was completed in 1966, but Diệm did not get to see his dream house because he was murdered by his own troops in 1963. The new building was named Independence Palace and was home to South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu until his hasty departure in 1975.

Norodom Palace, designed by Paris-trained Vietnamese architect Ngô Viet Thu, is an outstanding example of 1960s architecture. It has an airy and open atmosphere and its spacious chambers are tastefully decorated with the finest modern Vietnamese art and crafts. In its grandeur, the building feels worthy of a head of state.

The ground-floor room with the boat-shaped table was often used for conferences. Upstairs in the **Presidential Receiving Room** (Phu Dau Rong, or Dragon’s Head Room) – the one with the red chairs in it – the South Vietnamese president received foreign delegations. He sat behind the desk; the chairs with dragons carved into the arms were used by his assistants. The chair facing the desk was reserved for foreign ambassadors. The room with gold-coloured chairs and curtains was used

by the vice president. You can sit in the former president’s chair and have your photo taken.

In the back of the structure are the president’s living quarters. Check out the model boats, horse tails and severed elephants’ feet. The 3rd floor has a card-playing room with a bar and a movie-screening chamber. This floor also boasts a terrace with a heliport – there is still a derelict helicopter parked here. The 4th floor has a dance hall and casino.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the basement with its network of tunnels, telecommunications centre and war room (with the best map of Vietnam you’ll ever see pasted on the wall).

Reunification Palace is not open to visitors when official receptions or meetings are taking place. English- and French-speaking guides are on duty during opening hours.

WAR REMNANTS MUSEUM

Once known as the Museum of Chinese and American War Crimes, the **War Remnants Museum** (Bao Tang Chung Tich Chien Tranh; Map p336; ☎ 930 5587; 28 Đ Vo Van Tan; admission 15,000đ; 🕒 7.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm) is now the most popular museum in HCMC with Western tourists. Many of the atrocities documented here were well publicised in the West, but rarely do Westerners have the opportunity to hear the victims of US military action tell their own stories.

US armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, bombs and infantry weapons are on display outside. Many photographs illustrating US atrocities are from US sources, including photos of the infamous My Lai Massacre (see p271). There is a model of the notorious tiger cages used by the South Vietnamese military to house Viet Cong (VC) prisoners on Con Son Island and a guillotine used by the French on Viet Minh ‘troublemakers’. There are also pictures of deformed babies, their defects attributed to the USA’s widespread use of chemical herbicides.

In a final gallery, there’s a collection of posters and photographs showing support for the antiwar movement.

There are few museums in the world that drive home so well the point that war is horribly brutal and that many of its victims are civilians. Even those who supported the war would have a difficult time not being horrified by the photos of children mangled by US bombing and napalming. There are also scenes of torture – it takes a strong stomach to

look at these. You’ll also have the rare chance to see some of the experimental weapons used in the war, which were at one time military secrets, such as the *fléchette* (an artillery shell filled with thousands of tiny darts).

The War Remnants Museum is in the former US Information Service building, at the intersection with Đ Le Qui Don. Explanations are in Vietnamese, English and Chinese. Though a bit incongruous with the museum’s theme, **water-puppet theatre** is staged in a tent on the museum grounds (see p369).

MUSEUM OF HO CHI MINH CITY

Housed in a grey, neoclassical structure built in 1886 and once known as Gia Long Palace (later, the Revolutionary Museum), the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (Bao Tang Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh; Map p350; ☎ 829 9741; 65 Đ Ly Tu Trong; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-4pm) is a singularly beautiful and amazing building.

The museum displays artefacts from the various periods of the communist struggle for power in Vietnam. The photographs of anticolonial activists executed by the French appear out of place in the gilded, 19th-century ballrooms, but then again the contrast gives a sense of the immense power and complacency of the colonial French. There are photos of Vietnamese peace demonstrators in Saigon demanding that US troops get out; and a dramatic photo of Thich Quang Duc, the monk who made headlines worldwide, when he burned himself to death in 1963 to protest against the policies of President Ngô Đình Diệm (see the boxed text, p222).

The information plaques are in Vietnamese only, but some of the exhibits include documents in French or English, and many others are self-explanatory if you know some basic Vietnamese history (but if you don’t, see the History chapter, p28). The exhibitions cover the various periods in the city’s 300-year history.

Among the most interesting artefacts on display is a long, narrow rowing boat (*ghe*) with a false bottom in which arms were smuggled. Nearby is a small diorama of the Cu Chi Tunnels. The adjoining room has examples of infantry weapons used by the VC and various South Vietnamese and US medals, hats and plaques. A map shows communist advances during the dramatic collapse of South Vietnam in early 1975. There are also photographs of the liberation of Saigon.

Deep beneath the building is a network of reinforced concrete bunkers and fortified corridors. The system, branches of which stretch all the way to Reunification Palace, included living areas, a kitchen and a large meeting hall. In 1963 President Diệm and his brother hid here before fleeing to Cha Tam Church (p347). The network is not currently open to the public because most of the tunnels are flooded, but if you want to bring a torch (flashlight), a museum guard might show you around.

In the garden behind the museum is a Soviet tank and a US Huey UH-1 helicopter and anti-aircraft gun. In the garden fronting Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia is more military hardware, including the American-built F-5E jet used by a renegade South Vietnamese pilot to bomb the Presidential Palace (now Reunification Palace) on 8 April 1975.

The museum is located a block east of Reunification Palace.

HISTORY MUSEUM

The stunning Sino-French-style building that houses the **History Museum** (Bao Tang Lich Su; Map p336; ☎ 829 8146; Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; admission 15,000đ; 🕒 8-11am & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun) was built in 1929 by the Société des Études Indochinoises. It’s worth a visit just to view the architecture!

The museum has an excellent collection of artefacts illustrating the evolution of the cultures of Vietnam, from the Bronze Age Dong Son civilisation (13th century BC to 1st century AD) and the Oc-Eo (Funan) civilisation (1st to 6th centuries AD), to the Cham, Khmer and Vietnamese. There are many valuable relics taken from Cambodia’s Angkor Wat.

At the back of the building on the 3rd floor is a **research library** (☎ 829 0268; 🕒 Mon-Sat) with numerous books from the French-colonial period about Indochina.

Across from the entrance to the museum you’ll see the elaborate **Temple of King Hung Vuong**. The Hung kings are said to have been the first rulers of the Vietnamese nation, having established their rule in the Red River region before it was invaded by the Chinese.

The museum is just inside the main gate to the city zoo and botanic gardens (p356), where the east end of Đ Le Duan meets Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem.

Just across Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem is a small **military museum** (Map p336; ☎ 822 9387; 2 Đ Le Duan) devoted to Ho Chi Minh’s campaign to liberate the south. Inside is of minor interest, but

some US, Chinese and Soviet war material is on display outdoors, including a Cessna A-37 of the South Vietnamese Air Force and a US-built F-5E Tiger with the 20mm nose gun still loaded. The tank on display is one of the tanks that broke into the grounds of Reunification Palace on 30 April 1975.

JADE EMPEROR PAGODA

Built in 1909 by the Cantonese (Quang Dong) Congregation, the **Jade Emperor Pagoda** (Phuoc Hai Tu or Chua Ngoc Hoang; Map pp334-5; 73 Đ Mai Thi Luu) is truly a gem among Chinese temples. It is one of the most spectacularly colourful pagodas in HCMC, filled with statues of phantasmal divinities and grotesque heroes. The pungent smoke of burning joss sticks fills the air, obscuring the exquisite woodcarvings decorated with gilded Chinese characters. The roof is covered with elaborate tile work. The statues, which represent characters from both the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, are made of reinforced papier-mâché. The pagoda is dedicated to the Emperor of Jade, the supreme Taoist god.

Inside the main building are two especially fierce and menacing figures. On the right (as you face the altar) is a 4m-high statue of the general who defeated the Green Dragon (depicted underfoot). On the left is the general who defeated the White Tiger, which is also being stepped on.

The Taoist Jade Emperor (or King of Heaven, Ngoc Hoang), draped in luxurious robes, presides over the **main sanctuary**. He is flanked by his guardians, the Four Big Diamonds (Tu Dai Kim Cuong), so named because they are said to be as hard as diamonds.

Out the door on the left-hand side of the Jade Emperor's chamber is another room. The semi-enclosed area to the right (as you enter) is presided over by Thanh Hoang, the Chief of Hell; to the left is his red horse. Other figures here represent the gods who dispense punishments for evil acts and rewards for good deeds. The room also contains the famous **Hall of the Ten Hells** – carved wooden panels illustrating the varied torments awaiting evil people in each of the Ten Regions of Hell.

On the other side of the wall is a fascinating little room in which the **ceramic figures** of 12 women, overrun with children and wearing colourful clothes, sit in two rows of six. Each of the women exemplifies a human character-

istic, either good or bad (as in the case of the woman drinking alcohol from a jug). Each figure represents one year in the 12-year Chinese calendar. Presiding over the room is Kim Hoa Thanh Mau, the Chief of All Women.

The Jade Emperor Pagoda is in a part of the city known as Da Kao (or Da Cao). To get here, go to 20 Đ Dien Bien Phu and walk half a block to the northwest.

FINE ARTS MUSEUM

A classic yellow-and-white building with a modest Chinese influence, the **Fine Arts Museum** (Bao Tang My Thuat; Map p336; ☎ 829 4441; 97A Đ Pho Duc Chinh; admission 10,000đ; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), houses one of the more interesting collections in Vietnam – ranging from lacquer- and enamelware to contemporary oil paintings by Vietnamese and foreign artists. If that doesn't sound enticing, just go to see the huge hall with its beautifully tiled floors. On the 1st floor is a display of officially accepted contemporary art: most of it is just kitsch or desperate attempts to master abstract art, but occasionally something brilliant is displayed here. Most of the recent art is for sale and prices are fair.

The 2nd floor has older, politically correct art. Some of it is pretty crude: pictures of heroic figures waving red flags, children with rifles, a wounded soldier joining the Communist Party, innumerable tanks and weaponry, grotesque Americans and God-like reverence for Ho Chi Minh. However, it's worth seeing because Vietnamese artists managed not to be as dull and conformist as their counterparts in Eastern Europe sometimes were. Once you've passed several paintings and sculptures of Uncle Ho, you will see that those artists who studied before 1975 managed to somehow transfer their own aesthetics onto the world of their prescribed subjects. Most impressive are some drawings of prison riots in 1973 and some remarkable abstract paintings.

The 3rd floor has a good collection of older art dating back to the 4th century, including Oc-Eo (Funan) sculptures of Vishnu, the Buddha and other revered figures (carved in both wood and stone), which resemble styles of ancient Greece and Egypt. You will also find here the best Cham pieces outside of Danang. Also interesting are the many pieces of Indian art, such as stone elephant heads. Some pieces clearly originated in Angkor culture.

HO CHI MINH MUSEUM

This **museum** (Khu Luu Niem Bac Ho; Map p336; ☎ 840 0647; 1 Đ Nguyen Tat Thanh; admission 5000đ; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm) is in the old customs house in District 4, just across Ben Nghe Channel from the quayside end of ĐL Ham Nghi. Nicknamed the 'Dragon House' (Nha Rong), it was built in 1863. The tie between Ho Chi Minh and the museum building is tenuous: 21-year-old Ho, having signed on as a stoker and galley boy on a French freighter, left Vietnam from here in 1911 and thus began 30 years of exile in France, the Soviet Union, China and elsewhere.

The museum houses many of Ho's personal effects, including some of his clothing (he was a man of informal dress), sandals, his beloved US-made Zenith radio and other memorabilia. The explanatory signs in the museum are in Vietnamese, but if you know something about Uncle Ho (see p34) you should be able to follow most of the photographs and exhibits.

XA LOI PAGODA

Famed as the repository of a sacred relic of the Buddha, **Xa Loi Pagoda** (Map p336; 89 Đ Ba Huyen Thanh Quan) was built in 1956. In August 1963 truckloads of armed men under the command of President Ngo Dinh Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, attacked Xa Loi Pagoda, which had become a centre of opposition to the Diem government. The pagoda was ransacked and 400 monks and nuns, including the country's 80-year-old Buddhist patriarch, were arrested. This raid and others elsewhere helped solidify opposition among Buddhists to the Diem regime, a crucial factor in the US decision to support the coup against Diem. This pagoda was also the site of several self-immolations by monks protesting against the Diem regime and the American War.

Women enter the main hall of Xa Loi Pagoda by the staircase on the right as you come in the gate; men use the stairs on the left. The walls of the sanctuary are adorned with paintings depicting the Buddha's life.

Xa Loi Pagoda is in District 3 near Đ Dien Bien Phu. A monk preaches every Sunday from 8am to 10am. On days of the full moon and new moon, special prayers are held from 7am to 9am and 7pm to 8pm.

TRAN HUNG DAO TEMPLE

This small **temple** (Map pp334-5; 36 Đ Vo Thi Sau; ☎ 6-11am & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is dedicated to Tran Hung

Dao, a national hero who in 1287 vanquished an invasion force, said to have numbered 300,000 men, that had been dispatched by the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. The temple is a block northeast of the telecommunication dishes that are between Đ Dien Bien Phu and Đ Vo Thi Sau.

The public park between the dishes and ĐL Hai Ba Trung was built in 1983 on the site of the **Massiges Cemetery**, a burial ground for French soldiers and settlers. The remains of French military personnel were exhumed and repatriated to France. The tomb of the 18th-century French missionary and diplomat Pigneau de Béhaine, Bishop of Adran, which was completely destroyed after reunification, was also here.

NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL

Built between 1877 and 1883, **Notre Dame Cathedral** (Map p350; Đ Han Thuyen) is set in the heart of HCMC's government quarter. The cathedral faces Đ Dong Khoi. It is neo-Romanesque with two 40m-high square towers tipped with iron spires, which dominate the city's skyline. In front of the cathedral (in the centre of the square bounded by the main post office) is a statue of the Virgin Mary. If the front gates are locked, try the door on the side of the building that faces Reunification Palace.

Unusually, this cathedral has no stained-glass windows: the glass was a casualty of fighting during WWII. A number of foreign travellers worship here and the priests are allowed to add a short sermon in French or English to their longer presentations in Vietnamese. The 9.30am Sunday mass might be the best one for tourists to attend.

MARIAMMAN HINDU TEMPLE

This is the only **Hindu temple** (Chua Ba Mariamman; Map p336; 45 Đ Truong Dinh) still in use in HCMC and is a little piece of southern India in the centre of town. Though there are only 50 to 60 Hindus in HCMC – all of them Tamils – this temple is also considered sacred by many ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese. Indeed, it is reputed to have miraculous powers. The temple was built at the end of the 19th century and dedicated to the Hindu goddess Mariamman.

The lion to the left of the entrance used to be carried around the city in a street procession every autumn. In the shrine in the middle of the temple is **Mariamman**, flanked by her

guardians Maduraiveeran (to her left) and Pechiamman (to her right). In front of the Mariamman figure are two *linga*. Favourite offerings placed nearby often include joss sticks, jasmine, lilies and gladioli. The wooden stairs on the left (as you enter the building) lead to the roof, where you'll find two colourful **towers** covered with innumerable figures of lions, goddesses and guardians.

After reunification, the government took over the temple and turned part of it into a factory for joss sticks. Another section was occupied by a company producing seafood for export – the seafood was dried on the roof in the sun.

Mariamman Hindu Temple is only three blocks west of Ben Thanh Market. Take off your shoes before stepping onto the slightly raised platform.

SAIGON CENTRAL MOSQUE

Built by South Indian Muslims in 1935 on the site of an earlier mosque, the **Saigon Central Mosque** (Map p350; 66 Đ Dong Du) is an immaculately clean and well-kept island of calm in the middle of the bustling Dong Khoi area. In front of the sparkling white-and-blue structure, with its four nonfunctional minarets, is a pool for the ritual ablutions required by Islamic law before prayers. Take off your shoes before entering the sanctuary.

The simplicity of the mosque is in marked contrast to the exuberance of Chinese temple decoration, and the rows of figures facing elaborate ritual objects in Buddhist pagodas. Islamic law strictly forbids using human or animal figures for decoration.

Only half a dozen Indian Muslims remain in HCMC; most of the community fled in 1975. As a result, prayers – held five times a day – are sparsely attended, except on Friday, when several dozen worshippers (mainly non-Indian Muslims) are present.

There are 12 other mosques serving the 5000 or so Muslims in HCMC.

TON DUC THANG MUSEUM

This small, seldom-visited **museum** (Bao Tang Ton Duc Thang; Map p350; ☎ 829 7542; 5 Đ Ton Duc Thang; admission US\$1; 🕒 7.30–11.30am & 1.30–5pm Tue–Fri) is dedicated to Ton Duc Thang, Ho Chi Minh's successor as president of Vietnam, who was born in Long Xuyen, An Giang province, in 1888. He died in office in 1980. Photos and displays illustrate his role in the Vietnamese

Revolution, including a couple of very life-like exhibits representing the time he spent imprisoned on Con Son Island (p397).

The museum is on the waterfront, half a block north of the Tran Hung Dao statue.

PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE BUILDING

HCMC's gingerbread **Hôtel de Ville** (Map p350), one of the city's most prominent landmarks, is now somewhat incongruously the home of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee. Built between 1901 and 1908, the Hôtel de Ville is situated at the northwestern end of ĐL Nguyen Hue, facing the river. The former hotel is notable for its gardens, ornate façade and elegant interior lit with crystal chandeliers. It's easily the most photographed building in Vietnam. At night, the exterior is usually covered with thousands of geckos feasting on insects.

Unfortunately, you'll have to content yourself with admiring the exterior only. The building is not open to the public and requests by tourists to visit the interior are rudely rebuffed.

MUNICIPAL THEATRE

A grand colonial building with a sweeping staircase, the **Municipal Theatre** (Nha Hat Thanh Pho; Map p350; ☎ 829 9976; Lam Son Sq) is hard to miss at the intersection of Đ Dong Khoi and ĐL Le Loi. For information on performances held here, see p369.

CONG VIEN VAN HOA PARK

Next to the old Cercle Sportif, which was an elite sporting club during the French-colonial period, the bench-lined walks of **Cong Vien Van Hoa Park** (Map p336) are shaded with avenues of enormous tropical trees.

In the morning, you can often see people here practising the art of *thai cuc quyen*, or slow-motion shadow boxing. Within the park is also a small-scale model of Nha Trang's most famous Cham towers.

This place still has an active **sports club** that is possible to visit. It has 11 tennis courts, a passable swimming pool and a clubhouse, all of which have a faded colonial feel about them. The tennis courts are available for hire at a reasonable fee and hourly tickets are on sale for use of the pool. The antique dressing rooms are quaint, but there are no lockers.

There are also Roman-style baths and a coffee shop overlooking the colonnaded pool.

Other facilities include a gymnasium, table tennis, weights, wrestling mats and ballroom-dancing classes.

Cong Vien Van Hoa Park is adjacent to the Reunification Palace. There are entrances across from 115 Đ Nguyen Du and on Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai.

BINH SOUP SHOP

It might seem strange to introduce a noodle-soup restaurant as a sight, but there is more to **Binh Soup Shop** (Map p336; ☎ 848 3775; 7 Đ Ly Chinh Tha Thang, District 3; noodle soup 15,000đ) than just the soup. The Binh Soup Shop was the secret headquarters of the VC in Saigon. It was from here that the VC planned its attack on the US embassy and other places in Saigon during the Tet Offensive of 1968. One has to wonder how many US soldiers ate here, completely unaware that the staff were all VC infiltrators. By the way, the *pho* isn't bad here.

Cholon

A jewellery box of interesting Chinese-style temples awaits in Cholon (District 5) – it's well worth heading over to Chinatown for a half-day or more to explore. Aside from the temples and pagodas, you can sample some excellent Chinese and Vietnamese food – or have a swim at one of the water parks, if you get tempted out.

While you're roaming, stroll over to the strip of **traditional herb shops** (Map p346; Đ Hai Thuong Lan Ong) between Đ Luong Nhu Hoc and Đ Trieu Quang Phuc for an olfactory experience you won't soon forget. Here the streets are filled with amazing sights, sounds and, most of all, rich herbal smells.

QUAN AM PAGODA

One of Cholon's most active pagodas, **Quan Am Pagoda** (Map p346; 12 Đ Lao Tu) was founded by the Fujian Congregation in the early 19th century and displays obvious Chinese influences. It's named for the Goddess of Mercy, Quan The Am Bo Tat whose statue lies hidden behind a remarkably ornate exterior.

Fantastic ceramic scenes decorate the roof and depict figures from traditional Chinese plays and stories. The tableaux include ships, village houses and several ferocious dragons. Other unique features of this pagoda are the gold-and-lacquer panels of the entrance doors. Just inside, the walls of the porch are murals, in slight relief, of scenes of China from around

the time of Quan Cong. There are elaborate woodcarvings above the porch.

In the courtyard behind the main sanctuary, in the pink-tiled altar, is a figure of A Pho, the Holy Mother Celestial Empress, while Quan The Am Bo Tat, dressed in white embroidered robes, stands nearby.

PHUOC AN HOI QUAN PAGODA

Built in 1902 by the Fujian Congregation, **Phuoc An Hoi Quan Pagoda** (Map p346; 184 Đ Hung Vuong) is one of the most beautifully ornamented pagodas in HCMC. Of special interest are the many small porcelain figures, the elaborate brass ritual objects and the fine woodcarvings on the altars, walls, columns and hanging lanterns. From outside the building you can see the ceramic scenes, each containing innumerable small figurines, which decorate the roof.

To the left of the entrance is a life-size figure of the sacred horse of Quan Cong. Before leaving on a journey, people make offerings to the horse, then stroke its mane and ring the bell around its neck. Behind the main altar, with its stone and brass incense braziers, is Quan Cong, to whom the pagoda is dedicated.

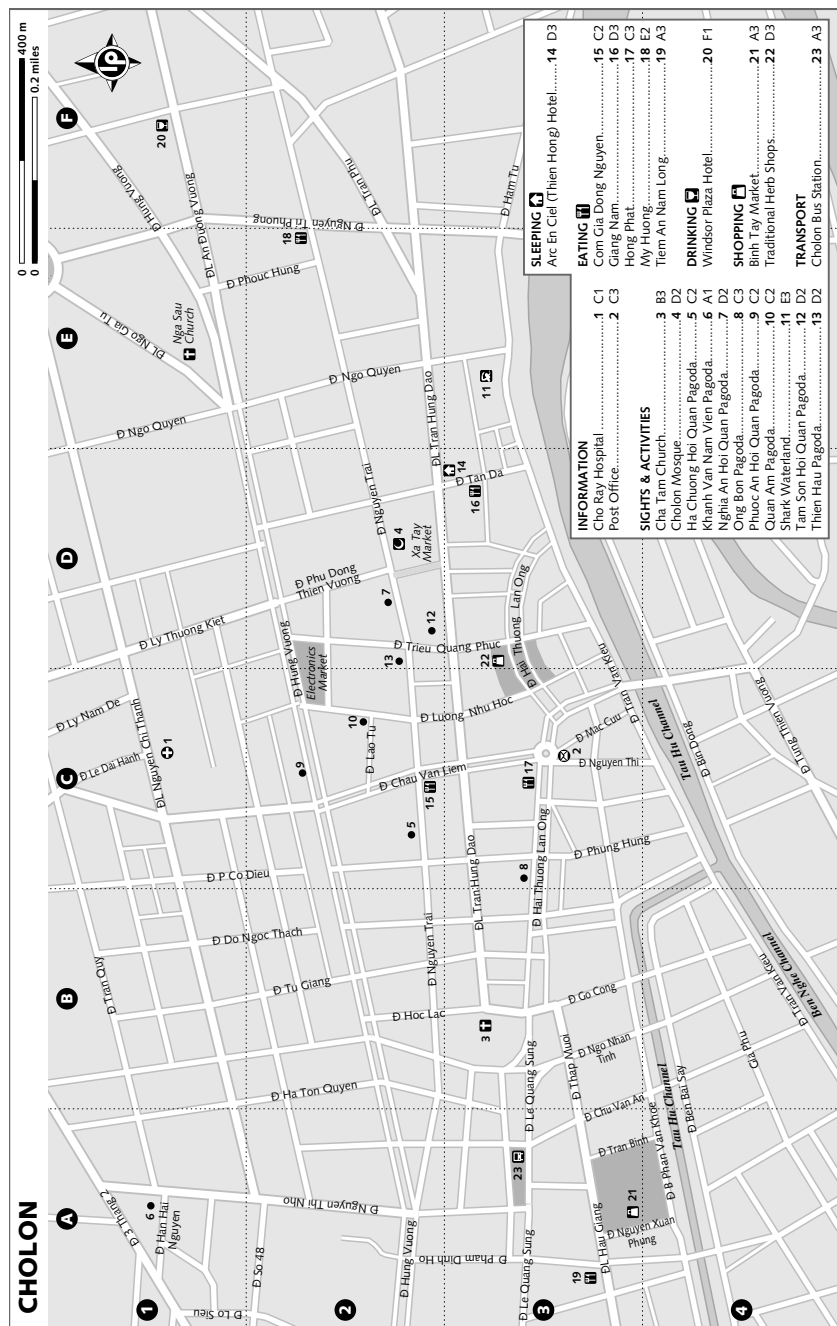
TAM SON HOI QUAN PAGODA

Built by the Fujian Congregation in the 19th century, **Tam Son Hoi Quan Pagoda** (Chua Ba Chua; Map p346; 118 Đ Trieu Quang Phuc) retains most of its original rich ornamentation. The pagoda is dedicated to Me Sanh, the Goddess of Fertility. It's particularly popular among local women who come here to pray for children.

Among the striking figures presented in this pagoda is the deified General Quan Cong with his long black beard. He's found to the right of the covered courtyard. Flanking him are two guardians, the Mandarin General Chau Xuong on the left and the Administrative Mandarin Quan Binh on the right. Next to Chau Xuong is Quan Cong's sacred red horse.

Across the courtyard from Quan Cong is a small room containing ossuary jars and memorials in which the dead are represented by their photographs. Next to this chamber is a small room containing the papier-mâché head of a dragon of the type used by the Fujian Congregation for dragon dancing.

Tam Son Hoi Quan Pagoda is located close to 370 ĐL Tran Hung Dao.



CHA TAM CHURCH

Cha Tam Church, built around the turn of the 19th century, with its façade of white and lime-green trim has a sleepy, tropical feel to it – a far cry from its role during one of Saigon's more harrowing epochs.

President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu took refuge in **Cha Tam Church** (Map p346; 25 Đ Hoc Lac) on 2 November 1963, after fleeing the Presidential Palace during a coup attempt. When their efforts to contact loyal military officers (of whom there was almost none) failed, Diem and Nhu agreed to surrender unconditionally and revealed where they were hiding.

The coup leaders sent an M-113 armoured personnel carrier to the church and the two were taken into custody. However, before the vehicle reached central Saigon the soldiers had killed Diem and Nhu by shooting them at point-blank range and then repeatedly stabbing their bodies.

When news of the deaths was broadcast on radio, Saigon exploded with rejoicing. Portraits of the two were torn up and political prisoners, many of whom had been tortured, were set free. The city's nightclubs, which had closed because of the Ngos' conservative Catholic beliefs, were reopened. Three weeks later the US president, John F Kennedy, was assassinated. As his administration had supported the coup against Diem, some conspiracy theorists have speculated that Diem's family orchestrated Kennedy's death in retaliation.

The statue in the tower is of François Xavier Tam Assou (1855–1934), a Chinese-born vicar apostolic (delegate of the pope) of Saigon. Today, the church has a very active congregation of 3000 ethnic Vietnamese and 2000 ethnic Chinese.

Masses are held daily. Cha Tam Church is at the western end of ĐL Tran Hung Dao.

QUAN AM THI KINH

The legend goes that Quan Am Thi Kinh was a woman unjustly turned out of her home by her husband. She disguised herself as a monk and went to live in a pagoda, where a young woman accused her of fathering her child. She accepted the blame – and the responsibility that went along with it – and again found herself out on the streets, this time with her 'son'. Much later, about to die, she returned to the monastery to confess her secret. When the emperor of China heard of her story, he declared her the Guardian Spirit of Mother and Child.

It is believed that she has the power to bestow male offspring on those who fervently believe in her and as such is extremely popular with childless couples.

THIEN HAU PAGODA

Built by the Cantonese Congregation in the early 19th century, this large **pagoda** (Ba Mieu, Pho Mieu or Chua Ba; Map p346; 710 Đ Nguyen Trai) is dedicated to Thien Hau and always has a mix of worshippers and visitors, mingling beneath large coils of incense suspended overhead.

Thien Hau (also known as Tuc Goi La Ba) can travel over the oceans on a mat and ride the clouds to wherever she pleases. Her mobility allows her to save people in trouble on the high seas. The Goddess is very popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which might explain why this pagoda is included on so many tour-group agendas.

Though there are guardians to each side of the entrance, it is said that the real protectors of the pagoda are the two land turtles that live here. There are intricate ceramic friezes above the roof line of the interior courtyard. Near the huge braziers are two miniature wooden structures in which a small figure of Thien Hau is paraded around the nearby streets on the 23rd day of the third lunar month.

On the main dais are three figures of Thien Hau, one behind the other, all flanked by two servants or guardians. To the left of the dais is a bed for Thien Hau. To the right is a scale-model boat and on the far right is the Goddess Long Mau, Protector of Mothers and Newborns.

NGHIA AN HOI QUAN PAGODA

Built by the Chaozhou Chinese Congregation, **Nghia An Hoi Quan Pagoda** (Map p346; 678 Đ Nguyen Trai) is noteworthy for its gilded woodwork. A large carved wooden boat hangs over the entrance, and, inside to the left of the doorway is an enormous representation of Quan Cong's red horse with its groom. The great general Quan Cong himself occupies a position in a glass case behind the main altar, with his assistants flanking him on both sides. Nghia An Hoi

Quan lets its hair down on the 14th day of the first lunar month when various dances are staged in front of the pagoda, with offerings made to the spirits.

CHOLON MOSQUE

The clean lines and lack of ornamentation of the **Cholon Mosque** (Map p346; 641 Đ Nguyen Trai) contrast starkly with nearby Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas. In the courtyard is a pool for ritual ablutions. Note the tiled niche in the wall (*mihrab*) indicating the direction of prayer, which is towards Mecca. The mosque was built by Tamil Muslims in 1932. Since 1975 it has served the Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim communities.

ONG BON PAGODA

Built by the Fujian Congregation, **Ong Bon Pagoda** (Chua Ong Bon & Nhi Phu Hoi Quan; Map p346; 264 Đ Hai Thuong Lan Ong) is yet another atmospheric pagoda full of gilded carvings and the ever-present smoke of burning incense. It's dedicated to Ong Bon, the guardian who presides over happiness and wealth. In hope of securing good fortune from the deity, believers burn fake paper money in the pagoda's furnace, located across the courtyard from the pagoda entrance.

Another feature of the pagoda is the intricately carved and gilded wooden altar, which faces Ong Bon. Along the walls of the chamber are rather indistinct murals of five tigers (to the left) and two dragons (to the right).

HA CHUONG HOI QUAN PAGODA

This typical Fujian **pagoda** (Map p346; 802 Đ Nguyen Trai) is dedicated to Thien Hau, who was born in Fujian. The four carved stone pillars, wrapped in painted dragons, were made in China and brought to Vietnam by boat. There are interesting murals to each side of the main altar and impressive ceramic relief scenes on the roof.

The pagoda becomes extremely active during the **Lantern Festival**, a Chinese holiday held on the 15th day of the first lunar month (the first full moon of the new lunar year).

KHANH VAN NAM VIEN PAGODA

Built between 1939 and 1942 by the Cantonese Congregation, **Khanh Van Nam Vien Pagoda** (Map p346; 46/5 Đ Lo Sieu) is said to be the only Taoist pagoda in Vietnam and is unique for its colourful statues of Taoist disciples. The

number of true Taoists in HCMC is estimated at no more than 5000, though most Chinese practise a mixture of Taoism and Buddhism.

Features to seek out at this pagoda include the unique 150cm-high statue of Lao-tse located upstairs. His surreal, mirror-edged halo is one of the more intriguing uses of fluorescent lighting. Off to the left of Lao-tse are two stone plaques with instructions for inhalation and exhalation exercises. A schematic drawing represents the human organs as a scene from rural China. The diaphragm, agent of inhalation, is at the bottom; the stomach is represented by a peasant ploughing with a water buffalo. The kidney is marked by four Yin-and-Yang symbols, the liver is shown as a grove of trees and the heart is represented by a circle with a peasant standing in it, above which is a constellation. The tall pagoda represents the throat and the broken rainbow is the mouth. At the top are mountains and a seated figure that represent the brain and imagination, respectively.

The pagoda operates a home for several dozen elderly people who have no family. Each of the old folk, most of whom are women, have their own wood stove (made of brick) on which they cook. Next door, which is also run by the pagoda, is a free medical clinic, which offers Chinese herbal medicines and acupuncture treatments to the community. If you would like to support this worthy venture you can leave a donation with the monks.

Prayers are held daily from 8am to 9am. In order to reach the pagoda, turn off Đ Nguyen Thi Nho, which runs perpendicular to Đ Hung Vuong (between Nos 269B and 271B).

Greater HCMC

Although Cholon has a high density of pagodas, there are several particularly striking ones out here, including the peaceful Giac Lam Pagoda with its dazzling architecture and ornamentation.

GIAC LAM PAGODA

Believed to be the oldest pagoda in greater HCMC, **Giac Lam Pagoda** (Map pp334-5; 118 Đ Lac Long Quan) dates from 1744. It's a fantastically atmospheric place full of gilded statues (over 100 in all), colourful wall panels (depicting among other things the path to enlightenment as well as the tortures awaiting those

condemned to hell) with one of the country's most impressive stupas (which is 32m tall). For the sick and elderly, the pagoda is a minor pilgrimage sight, as it contains a bronze bell that when rung is believed to answer the prayers posted by petitioners. Home to several monks, the Buddhist pagoda also incorporates aspects of Taoism and Confucianism. It is well worth the trip out here from the city centre and is one of the city's cultural relics.

The pagoda is set in a peaceful, gardenlike setting with the **tombs** of venerated monks to the right of the two-tiered pagoda gate. The looming Bodhi or pipal tree (*bo de*) located in the front garden was the gift of a monk from Sri Lanka in 1953. Next to the tree is a gleaming white statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat standing on a lotus blossom – a symbol of purity.

Inside the reception area of the **main building** is the 18-armed Chuan De, another form of the Goddess of Mercy. Carved hardwood columns bear gilded Vietnamese inscriptions, with the portraits of great monks from previous generations (and dragons hidden in clouds) looking down on the proceedings.

The main **sanctuary** lies in the next room, filled with countless gilded figures. On the dais in the centre of the back row sits A Di Da, the Buddha of the Past (Amitabha), easily spotted by his colourful halo. The fat laughing fellow, seated with five children climbing all over him, is Ameda, the Buddha of enlightenment, compassion and wisdom. On the altars along the side walls of the sanctuary are various Bodhisattvas and two 10-panelled drawings: the first depicts the Judges of the 10 Regions of Hell – and the various gruesome treatments meted out to the unworthy. Next to it are 10 panels showing scenes from Thich Ca Buddha's life from birth to enlightenment.

The red-and-gold Christmas tree-shaped object is a wooden altar bearing 49 lamps and 49 miniature Bodhisattva statues. People pray for sick relatives or ask for happiness by contributing kerosene for use in the lamps. Petitioners' names and those of ill family members are written on slips of paper, which are attached to the branches of the 'tree'.

The frame of the large bronze bell in the corner resembles a bulletin board because petitioners have attached to it lists of names: those of people seeking happiness and those of the sick and the dead, placed there by relatives. It is believed that when the bell is rung,

the sound will resonate to the heavens above and the underground heavens, carrying with it the attached supplications.

Prayers here consist of chanting to the accompaniment of drums, bells and gongs, and they follow a traditional rite seldom performed these days. Prayers are held daily from 4am to 5am, 11am to noon, 4pm to 5pm and 7pm to 9pm.

Giac Lam Pagoda is about 3km from Cholon in the Tan Binh district, best reached by taxi or *xe om*.

GIAC VIEN PAGODA

Architecturally similar to Giac Lam, this striking **pagoda** (Map pp334-5; Đ Lac Long Quan; ☎ 7-11.30am & 1.30-7pm) shares with it an atmosphere of scholarly serenity, though Giac Vien is less visited and in a more rural setting near Dam Sen Lake in District 11. The pagoda was founded by Hai Tinh Giac Vien in the late 1700s. It is said that Emperor Gia Long, who died in 1819, used to worship at Giac Vien. Today 10 monks live here. The pagoda remains a marvellously preserved artefact from the past, boasting some 100 lavish carvings of various divinities.

Hidden behind a warren of winding streets, the pagoda, like Giac Lam, has several impressive **tombs** on the right leading up to the pagoda itself. Funeral tablets line the first chamber, while the second chamber is dominated by a statue of Hai Tinh Giac Vien holding a horsetail switch. Nearby portraits depict his disciples and successors. Opposite Hai Tinh Giac Vien is a representation of the 18-armed Chuan De, who is flanked by two guardians.

The main **sanctuary** is on the other side of the wall behind the Hai Tinh Giac Vien statue with a dais behind a fantastic brass incense basin with fierce dragon heads emerging from each side. On the altar to the left of the dais is Dai The Chi Bo Tat; on the altar to the right is Quan The Am Bo Tat. The Guardian of the Pagoda is against the wall opposite the dais. Nearby is a 'Christmas tree' similar to the one in Giac Lam Pagoda (opposite). Lining the side walls are the Judges of the 10 Regions of Hell (holding scrolls) and 18 Bodhisattvas.

Giac Vien Pagoda is open during the hours listed, but go before dark as the electricity is often out in the evening. Prayers are held daily from 4am to 5am, 8am to 10am, 2pm to 3pm, 4pm to 5pm and 7pm to 9pm.

PHUNG SON PAGODA

This **pagoda** (Map pp334-5; Phung Son Tu & Chua Go; 1408 ĐL 3/2) is extremely rich in statuary made of bronze, wood, ceramic and hammered copper. It's peopled with a mix of gilded and beautifully carved statues (some painted). This Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda was built between 1802 and 1820 on the site of structures from the Oc-Eo (Funan) period, dating back at least to the early centuries of Christianity. Other foundations of Funanese buildings have also been discovered here.

Once upon a time, it was decided that Phung Son Pagoda should be moved to a different site. The pagoda's ritual objects – bells, drums, statues – were loaded onto the back of a white elephant, but the elephant slipped

because of the great weight and all the precious objects fell into a nearby pond. This event was interpreted as an omen that the pagoda should remain at its original location. All the articles were retrieved except for the bell, which locals say was heard ringing, until about a century ago, whenever there was a full or new moon.

The main dais, with its many levels, is dominated by an enormous gilded A Di Da Buddha seated under a canopy flanked by long mobiles resembling human forms without heads. To the left of the main dais is an altar with a statue of Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism from India to China. The statue, which is made of Chinese ceramic, has a face with Indian features.

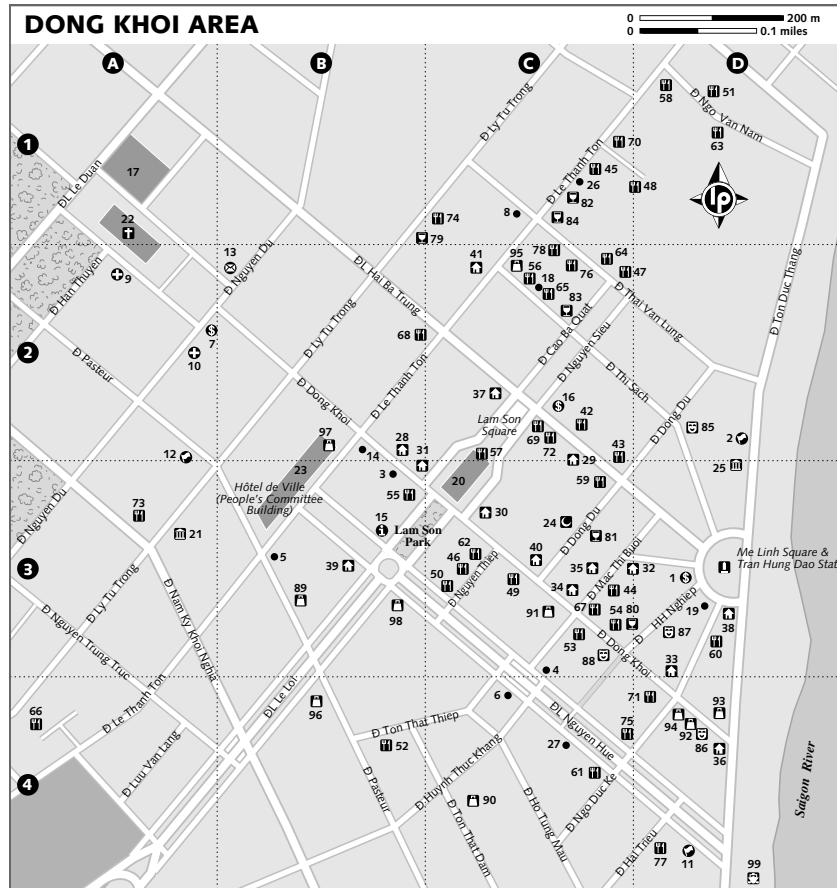
Phung Son Pagoda is in District 11. Prayers are held three times a day, from 4am to 5am, 4pm to 5pm and 6pm to 7pm. The main entrances are locked most of the time because of problems with theft, but the side entrance (to the left as you approach the building) is open during prayer times.

LE VAN DUYET TEMPLE

Dedicated to Marshal Le Van Duyet (1763–1831), this **temple** (Map pp334–5) is also his burial place as well as that of his wife's. The marshal was a South Vietnamese general and viceroy who helped put down the Tay Son Rebellion and reunify Vietnam. When the Nguyen dynasty came to power in 1802, he

was elevated by Emperor Gia Long to the rank of marshal. Le Van Duyet fell into disfavour with Gia Long's successor, Minh Mang, who tried him posthumously and desecrated his grave. Emperor Thieu Tri, who succeeded Minh Mang, restored the tomb, thus fulfilling a prophecy of its destruction and restoration. Le Van Duyet was considered a national hero in the South before 1975, but is disliked by the communists because of his involvement in the expansion of French influence.

The temple itself was renovated in 1937 and has a distinctly modern feel to it, though since 1975 the government has done little to keep it from becoming dilapidated. Among the items on display are a portrait of Le Van Duyet, some



HO CHI MINH CITY

HO CHI MINH CITY

INFORMATION		Huong Sen Hotel.....	34 C3	Restaurant 31.....	74 C1
ANZ Bank.....	1 D3	Kim Long Hotel.....	35 C3	Santa Lucia.....	75 C4
Ausiana Travel Mate.....	(see 15)	Majestic Hotel.....	36 D4	Skewers.....	76 C2
Australian Consulate.....	2 D2	Park Hyatt Saigon.....	37 C2	Urvashi.....	77 D4
Buffalo Tours.....	(see 36)	Renaissance Riverside Hotel.....	38 D3	Veggy's.....	78 C2
Canadian Consulate.....	(see 7)	Rex Hotel.....	39 B3	Xu.....	(see 69)
DHL.....	(see 13)	Sheraton Saigon.....	40 C3		
Fahasa Bookshop.....	3 B3	Spring Hotel.....	41 C2		
Fahasa Bookshop.....	4 C3			DRINKING ☑	
Federal Express.....	5 B3			Blue Gecko Bar.....	79 B1
Grand Dentistry.....	6 C4			Heart of Darkness.....	(see 82)
HCMC Family Medical Practice.....	(see 17)			Manna.....	80 C3
HSBC.....	7 A2	EATING ☑		Q Bar.....	(see 20)
Institute of Cultural Exchange with France.....	8 C1	Akatonbo.....	42 C2	Qing.....	81 C3
International Medical Centre.....	9 A2	Annam Gourmet Shop.....	43 C2	Saigon Saigon Bar.....	(see 30)
International SOS.....	10 A2	Annie's Pizza.....	44 C3	Samsara.....	(see 49)
Japanese Embassy.....	11 D4	Ashoka.....	45 C1	Sheridan's Irish House.....	82 C1
Lao Consulate.....	12 A2	Augustin.....	46 C3	Temple Club.....	(see 52)
Main Post Office.....	13 B2	Bia Tuoi Pacific.....	47 D2	Vasco's.....	83 C2
New Zealand Consulate.....	(see 7)	Brodard Café.....	49 C3	Wild Horse Saloon.....	84 C1
Saigon Tourist.....	14 B2	Camargue.....	(see 83)		
Tourist Information Center.....	15 B3	Ciao Café.....	50 C3		
Vietcombank.....	16 C2	Encore Angkor Plus.....	51 D1	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
		Fanny.....	52 B4	Apocalypse Now.....	85 D2
		Gallery Deli.....	53 C3	Diamond Plaza Cinema.....	(see 17)
		Gardenstadt.....	54 C3	Maxim's Dinner Theatre.....	86 D4
		Givral.....	55 B3	Municipal Theatre.....	(see 20)
		Hakata.....	56 C2	Tropical Rainforest Disco.....	87 D3
		Highlands Coffee.....	57 C2	Underground.....	88 C3
		Hoi An.....	58 D1		
		Indian Canteen.....	(see 24)	SHOPPING ☑	
		Java Coffee Bar.....	59 C3	Chi Chi.....	89 B3
		Golden Lotus Foot Massage.....	60 D3	Huynh Thuc Khang Street Market.....	90 C4
		Me Linh Square Point Building.....	19 D3	Khai Silk.....	91 C3
		Municipal Theatre.....	20 C3	Living & Giving.....	(see 60)
		Museum of Ho Chi Minh City.....	21 A3	Lotus.....	92 D4
		Notre Dame Cathedral.....	22 A1	Nguyen Freres.....	93 D4
		People's Committee Building.....	23 B3	Precious Qui.....	94 D4
		Saigon Central Mosque.....	24 C3	Reda.....	95 C2
		Ton Duc Thang Museum.....	25 D3	Saigon Centre.....	96 B4
		Utopia Café.....	26 C1	Song.....	97 B2
		Zanadu Health Club.....	27 C4	Tax Department Store (Russian Market).....	98 B3
		SLEEPING ☑		TRANSPORT	
Asian Hotel.....	28 B2	Paris Deli.....	(see 96)	Bach Dang Jetty (Hydrofoils to Vung Tau).....	99 D4
Bong Sen Annexe.....	29 C2	Pat & Chou.....	(see 72)	Boats for Hire.....	(see 99)
Caravelle Hotel.....	30 C3	Pau Hanna.....	70 C1		
Continental Hotel.....	31 B3	Pho 24.....	(see 72)		
Dong Do Hotel.....	32 C3	Pho Oso.....	71 D4		
Grand Hotel.....	33 D3	Pomodoro.....	72 C2		
		Quan An Ngon.....	73 A3		

of his personal effects (including European-style crystal goblets) and other antiques. There are two wonderful life-size horse statues on either side of the entrance to the third and last chamber, which is kept locked.

During celebrations of Tet and on the 30th day of the seventh lunar month (the anniversary of Le Van Duyet's death), the tomb is thronged with pilgrims. Vietnamese used to come here to take oaths of good faith if they could not afford the services of a court of justice.

There are tropical fish on sale for visitors. The caged birds that are for sale are bought by pilgrims and freed to earn merit. The birds are often recaptured (and liberated again).

The temple is reached by heading north from the city centre on Đ Dinh Tien Hoang, all the way to ĐL Phan Dang Luu; it's easy to spot from the southeast corner.

AN QUANG PAGODA

This **pagoda** (Map pp334-5; Đ Su Van Hanh) gained some notoriety during the American War as the home of Thich Tri Quang, a powerful monk who led protests against the South Vietnamese government in 1963 and 1966. When the war ended you would have expected the communists to be grateful. Instead, he was placed under house arrest and later thrown into solitary confinement for 16 months. Thich Tri Quang was eventually released and is said to be still living at An Quang Pagoda.

An Quang Pagoda is on Đ Su Van Hanh, near the intersection with Đ Ba Hat, in District 10.

CHO QUAN CHURCH

Built by the French about 100 years ago, **Cho Quan Church** (Map pp334-5; 133 Đ Tran Binh Trong; ☎ 4-7am & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 4-9am & 1.30-6pm Sun) is one of the largest churches in HCMC. Jesus on the altar has a neon halo, though the best reason to come here is for the view from the belfry (a steep climb). The church is between ĐL Tran Hung Dao and Đ Nguyen Trai. Sunday masses are held at 5am, 6.30am, 8.30am, 4.30pm and 6pm.

ACTIVITIES Bowling

Diamond Superbowl (Map p350; ☎ 825 7778; Diamond Plaza, 34 ĐL Le Duan; per hr from 120,000đ; ☎ 10-1am) This is a state-of-the-art, 32-lane bowling alley smack dab in the centre of town. It's

very popular with locals and is notable for having fluorescent bowling balls and computerised scoring. Attached is a large amusement centre with billiards, a video-game arcade and shops.

Gyms & Pools

Even if you don't make it to one of Saigon's water parks (p355) or to Cong Vien Van Hoa Park (p344), some of HCMC's finer hotels have gyms with attractive swimming pools attached. You needn't stay there to swim, but you'll have to pay an admission fee of US\$8 to US\$18 per day. Hotels offering access to their pools include the **Legend** (☎ 823 3333; 2A Đ Ton Duc Thang, District 1), Park Hyatt Saigon (p360), Majestic Hotel (p360), Renaissance Riverside Hotel (p360) and Rex Hotel (p360).

There are a number of less-expensive public pools and some of the newer ones are in very good condition. These pools charge by the hour and this works out to be very cheap, if you're staying only a short time.

Lam Son Pool (Map pp334-5; ☎ 835 8028; 342 Đ Tran Binh Trong, District 5; admission per hr 5000đ, after 5pm 6000đ; ☎ 8am-8pm) Has an Olympic-sized pool.

Lan Anh Club (Map pp334-5; ☎ 862 7144; 291 Cach Mang Thang Tam, District 10; admission gym/pool 40,000đ/25,000đ; ☎ pool 6am-9pm) Good gym here.

Workers' Club (Map p336; ☎ 930 1819; 55B Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, District 3; admission per hr 10,000đ)

Golf

If you're serious about golf, there are top-notch courses in both Phan Thiet (p305) and Dalat (p312). Visit www.vietnamgolffresorts.com for more information on the courses and reasonably priced golf package tours.

Vietnam Golf and Country Club (Cau Lac Bo Golf Quoc Te Viet Nam; ☎ 733 0126; www.vietnamgolffcc.com; Long Thanh My Village, District 9; driving range/full round US\$10/85), situated about 15km east of central HCMC, was the first in Vietnam to provide night golfing under floodlights. Other facilities include tennis courts and a swimming pool.

Rach Chiec Driving Range (☎ 896 0756; Hwy 1, An Phu Village, District 9; 50 balls 50,000đ; ☎ 6am-10pm) is a good place to practise your swing; clubs, shoes and instructors can be hired. It's a 20-minute drive north from central HCMC.

Massages & Spas

HCMC offers some truly fantastic settings for pampering – the perfect antidote to a fre-

netic day spent dodging motorbikes. While many midrange and upmarket hotels offer massage service, some are more legitimate than others.

L'Apothiquaire (Map p336; ☎ 932 5181; www.lapothiquaire.com; 64A Đ Truong Dinh; per hr massage US\$20; ☎ 9am-9pm; ☎), the city's most elegant spa, is housed in a pretty, white mansion tucked down a quiet alley, with numerous services available. Guests enjoy body wraps, massages, facials, foot treatments and herbal baths, and L'Apothiquaire makes its own line of lotions and cosmetics. Those seeking a bit more activity can try yoga, t'ai chi or pilates classes. There's also an excellent meal served during lunchtime, and if you become a member (or book a package), you'll have free use of the pool and sauna.

Vietnamese Traditional Massage Institute (Map p357; ☎ 839 6697; 185 Đ Cong Quynh; per hr 35,000-45,000đ, sauna 25,000đ; ☎ 9am-9pm) is not the cleanest setting, but it does offer inexpensive, no-nonsense massages performed by well-trained blind masseurs from the Ho Chi Minh City Association for the Blind.

Spa Tropic (Map p336; ☎ 822 8895; www.spatropic.com; 187B ĐL Hai Ba Trung, District 3; per hr massage US\$25; ☎ 10am-8pm) is a good place to spoil yourself with a top-notch 'proper' massage. This Zen-like beauty spa offers an array of aromatherapy facial treatments, body treatments and therapeutic massage, from Swedish and deep-tissue to shiatsu. Spa Tropic is found in the same quiet alley as Tib Restaurant (p362). Call ahead for reservations.

Dong Du Salon (Map p350; ☎ 823 2414; 31 Đ Dong Du; ☎ 10am-11pm), above the Qing bar, this well-appointed place offers manicures (US\$2), pedicures (US\$2) and that all-important foot massage (US\$10 for 70 minutes).

Aqua Day Spa (Map p350; ☎ 827 2828; www.aquadaysasaigon.com; Sheraton Saigon, 88 Đ Dong Khoi; ☎ 10am-11pm) is HCMC's most luxurious spa and is a beautifully set affair offering a range of treatments, including warm stone massage (US\$55 for 1½ hours), herbal scrubs (US\$45 for one hour), foot pampering (US\$35 for 45 minutes) and back massages (US\$25 for 30 minutes).

Zanadu Health Club (Map p350; ☎ 822 2999; enquiries@saigon.duxton.com.vn; 63 ĐL Nguyen Hue), the spa at the Duxton Hotel, is a great place to drop in for a massage (US\$23 for one hour).

Golden Lotus Foot Massage Club (Map p350; ☎ 829 6400; 20 ĐL Thi Sach) delivers bliss to overworked

gams, and also gives general body massage. Lotus' most popular package includes a 90-minute massage followed by ten minutes of 'Lotus tea time' (US\$13).

Relax House (Map p357; ☎ 404 2284; 242 Đ Bui Vien; ☎ 10am-11pm) offers pedicures (US\$2), manicures (US\$2) and foot massages (45 minutes US\$7).

Yoga & Martial Arts

There are several places in town to take yoga classes, including the calming L'Apothiquaire (left). If you're interested in martial arts, the best place to see (or try) *thai cuc quyen* is at Cong Vien Van Hoa Park (p344) or in the Cholon district, where there is a large ethnic-Chinese population. Ask the staff at the Arc En Ciel Hotel (p360) to point you in the right direction.

Saigon Yoga (Map p336; ☎ 910 5181; www.saigonyoga.com; 10F Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; price per class/month US\$12/90; ☎ 8am-7pm) is a small yoga studio (tucked down a narrow alley) offering Vikram, Ashtanga, Vinyasa and power yoga as well as pilates classes taught by US and Singaporean instructors. Short-term visitors can take advantage of seven days of unlimited yoga for US\$20.

K1 Boxing Centre (Map pp334-5; ☎ 0918 337 111; www.teamminetti.com; 11th fl, 159/52/21B Đ Tran Van Dang; per class 200,000đ; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) is ideal for kick-boxing enthusiasts, and the place to improve your technique. The full-contact dojo is run by Frenchman David 'Serial Striker' Minetti. Private lessons and monthly rates are available.

WALKING TOUR

Although HCMC is a sprawling metropolis – and growing by the day – there is still some splendid exploring you can do on foot. This walking tour covers the city centre, District 1 (or 'Saigon'), and can be done in one, stimulus-filled day.

Begin your excursion bright and early in **Pham Ngu Lao (1)**, a teeming area of colourful shops and backpacker cafés. Skip the greasy eggs and bacon, however, and instead grab a bowl of steaming *pho*, which you can enjoy from a sidewalk vendor (prevalent along Đ Bui Vien) or a few blocks away from **Pho 2000 (2; p365)**, serving tasty noodles to locals, foreigners and the odd dignitary from time to time – including former US president Bill Clinton.

Cross the road and enter the vast indoor **Ben Thanh Market** (3; p372), which is at its bustling best in the morning. After exploring the market, cross the massive roundabout (carefully!), where you'll see a statue of **Tran Nguyen Hai** (4) on horseback. One short block south, on Đ Pho Duc Chinh, is the quaint **Fine Arts Museum** (5; p342), where you can tour some exhibits, and peek in some excellent galleries

behind the museum. Zigzag east to ĐL Ham Nghi and turn north again on Đ Ton That Dam to stroll through the colourful outdoor **street market** (6). Nearby, on Đ Ton That Dam, you can stop for a snack at **Fanny** (7; p365), which serves Saigon's best ice cream. From there, take a left to Đ Pasteur and continue up to ĐL Le Loi, the large boulevard leading towards the grand and thoughtfully restored **Municipal Theatre** (8; p344).

One short block before the theatre, turn left at the **Rex Hotel** (9; p360) and head up ĐL Nguyen Hue. Just ahead, at the northern end of the boulevard, is the stately French-colonial era **Hôtel de Ville** (10; p344). You'll have to admire it from the outside because it's now home to the local People's Commit-

tee – requests to visit the interior are denied. However, a one-block walk south on Đ Le Thanh Ton will bring you to the **Museum of Ho Chi Minh City** (11; p341), where visitors are warmly received.

The popular **War Remnants Museum** (12; p340) is just a few blocks along Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia then left on Đ Vo Van Tan. Nearby is the **Reunification Palace** (13; p339). Break up your sightseeing with lunch at one of many excellent restaurants nearby, including **Quan An Ngon** (14; p361).

After refuelling, stroll north along ĐL Le Duan, stopping to look at **Notre Dame Cathedral** (15; p343) and the impressive French-style **post office** (16; p338). There you can buy lovely stamps and post letters to your soon-to-be-jalous friends back home. If your energy is waning, call it a day and skip to No 19, otherwise continue along Đ Le Duan to the end of the boulevard where you'll find one of HCMC's best museums, the excellent **History Museum** (17; p341), which is on the grounds of the zoo and botanic gardens.

A few blocks northwest along Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem will bring you to **Jade Emperor Pagoda** (18; p342), a remarkably peaceful (and photogenic) refuge just steps from a busy avenue.

As the afternoon wanes, end your walking tour at the rooftop bar of the **Sheraton Saigon** (19; p360) – if coming from the Jade Emperor Pagoda, consider hopping on a *xe om* and zipping there for 10,000d. With a refreshing cocktail in hand, you can enjoy fine views over the city – a fair bit of which you've just traversed.

COURSES

Cooking

Several hotels offer cooking classes, including the following:

Caravelle Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 823 4999; 19 Đ Lam Son Sq, District 1; per person US\$40) offers a one-day class that includes a visit to the market, followed by in-depth instruction on meal preparation. A minimum of 10 are needed per class.

Bi Saigon (Map p357; ☎ 836 0678; www.bisaigon.com; 185/26 Đ Pham Ngu Lao, District 1; per person per dish US\$15). organises private cooking classes on request.

Language

The majority of foreign-language students enrol at **Teacher Training University** (Đại Học Sư Phạm; Map pp334-5; ☎ 835 5100; ciecer@hcm.vnn.vn; 280 An Duong

Vuong, District 5; private/group class US\$4.50/3), a department of Ho Chi Minh City University.

Classes at the **University of Social Sciences & Humanities** (Đại Học Khoa Học Xã Hội Và Nhân Văn; Map p336; ☎ 822 5009; 12 Dinh Tien Hoang, District 1; group class per hr US\$3) run on a term schedule.

More informal study is available at **Utopia Café** (Map p350; ☎ 824 2487; shop@utopia-café.com; 17/6A Đ Le Thanh Ton, District 1; private lessons per 60/90 min 70,000/90,000d; ☎ 8.30am-9pm), with one-on-one instruction. Utopia can also arrange visa extensions.

HCMC FOR CHILDREN

See p368 for information about Binh Quoi Tourist Village, a great place for kids.

Dam Sen Park

Probably the single best place in HCMC for kids, the sprawling **Dam Sen Park** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 858 7826; 3 Đ Hoa Binh; www.damsenpark.com.vn; adult/child 18,000/12,000d; ☎ 7am-9pm) provides a wide variety of amusements, including paddle-boat rides around a lake lined with dragons, games, rides (a monorail courses around the park – a good way to get your bearings; there's also a roller coaster, Ferris wheel and bumper cars) and various parks and theme areas – orchid gardens, an aviary, a dinosaur park and the like. On weekends the bandstand sees a range of shows, featuring singing and dancing warriors, rabbits and hip-hop stars all under the age of 12. Fishing is allowed in the lakes. There's also a water park (p356) on the grounds. Dam Sen Park is located in District 11, northwest of Cholon.

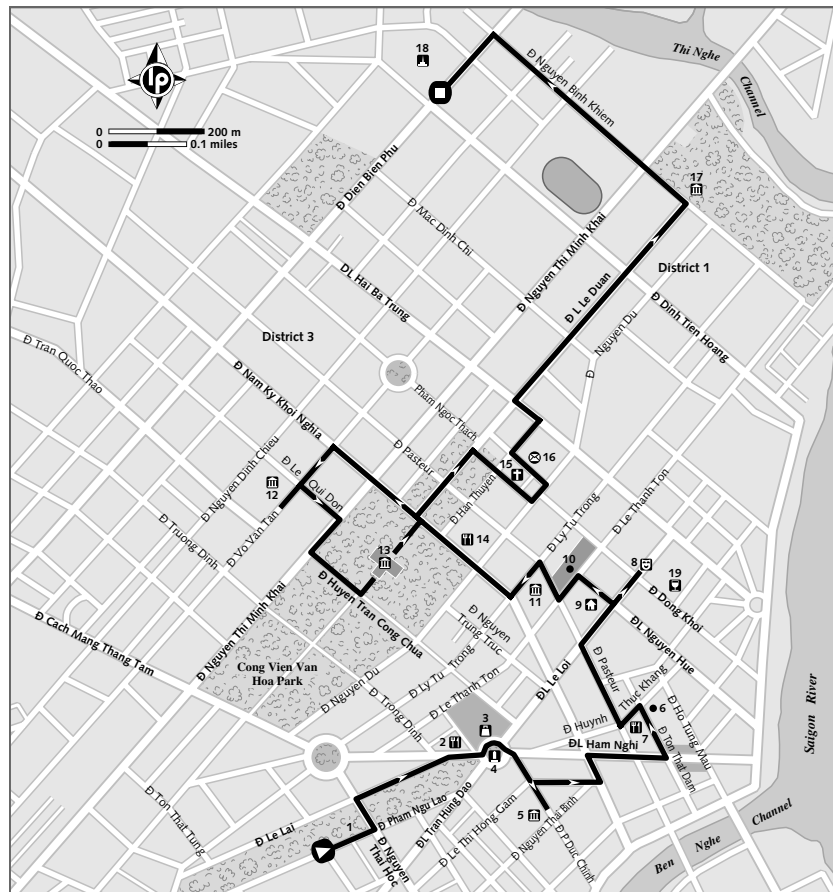
Water Parks

Outside the city centre, a slew of water parks offer cool relief from the heat. Anyone with kids and a half-day to spare will quickly come to appreciate these wet playgrounds on a sweltering day. To avoid the crowds, avoid going on weekends and public holidays.

Saigon Water Park (☎ 897 0456; Đ Kha Van Can, Thu Duc district; adult/child 60,000/35,000d, swim-only ticket 35,000d; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun & public holidays), a giant oasis in the suburbs, lies on the banks of the Saigon River. It's chock-full of pools and water rides, including loop-the-loop slides, a children's wading pool and even a wave pool. To get here, a meter taxi costs about 60,000d; shuttle buses (every half-hour) from Ben Thanh Market (Map p336) cost 5000d.

WALK FACTS

Start Pham Ngu Lao
End Sheraton Saigon
Distance 5km
Duration approximately 6 hours



Dam Sen Water Park (Map pp334-5; ☎ 858 8418; www.damsenwaterpark.com.vn; 3 Đ Hoa Binh; adult/child 45,000/30,000d; 🕒 9am-6pm) is closer to central HCMC than Saigon Water Park. It has water slides, rivers with rapids (or slow currents) and rope swings for flips and fantastic belly flops.

Shark Waterland (Map p346; ☎ 853 7867; 600 Đ Ham Tu, district 5; admission 20,000-45,000d; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat & Sun), despite the ominous name, is a good spot if you happen to be in Cholon. On a smaller scale than the larger water parks around HCMC, this place still has pools and slides.

Botanic Gardens

One of the first projects undertaken by the French after they established Cochinchina as a colony was to found the **gardens** (Map p336; Thao Cam Vien; ☎ 829 3901; 2 Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; adult/child 8000/4000d; 🕒 7am-10pm). Though once one of the finest such gardens in Asia, they're now merely a pleasant place for a stroll under giant tropical trees. The emphasis is on the fun fair, with kids' rides, a fun house, miniature train, house of mirrors and such.

We strongly recommend against visiting the poorly kept zoo animals, which live at the usual (ie marginal) Vietnamese standard.

Standing just inside the main zoo gate (Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem on the eastern end of Đ Le Duan) you'll be flanked by two striking architectural gems, the impressive Temple of King Hung Vuong and the History Museum (p341).

TOURS

There are surprisingly few day tours of HCMC itself available, though any local travel agent can come up with something for a fee. Hiring a *cyclo* for a half-day or full day of sightseeing is an interesting option, but be sure to agree on the price before setting out (most drivers charge around US\$1 per hour).

There are heaps of organised tours to the outlying areas such as the Cu Chi Tunnels (p378), Tay Ninh (p381) and the Mekong Delta (p400). Some tours are day trips and other are overnighters. The cheapest tours are available from cafés and agencies in the Pham Ngu Lao area (see p339).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Saigon Cyclo Race (mid-March) Professional and amateur *cyclo* drivers find out who's fastest; money raised is donated to local charities.

Festival at Lang Ong

(30th day of 7th lunar month) People pray for happiness and the health of the country at the Ong Temple in HCMC's Binh Thanh district; plays and musical performances are staged.

SLEEPING

District 1 is the undisputed lodging capital of HCMC, though the decision whether to go east (fancy) or west (cheap) depends on what you're after. Budget travellers often head straight to the Pham Ngu Lao area (Map p357), where thrifty hotels and backpacker-filled cafés line the streets. Those seeking upscale digs go to Dong Khoi area (Map p350), home to the city's best hotels, restaurants and bars. For an alternative universe, try Cholon (Map p346), home to pagodas, Chinese eateries and which sees many visitors from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Budget

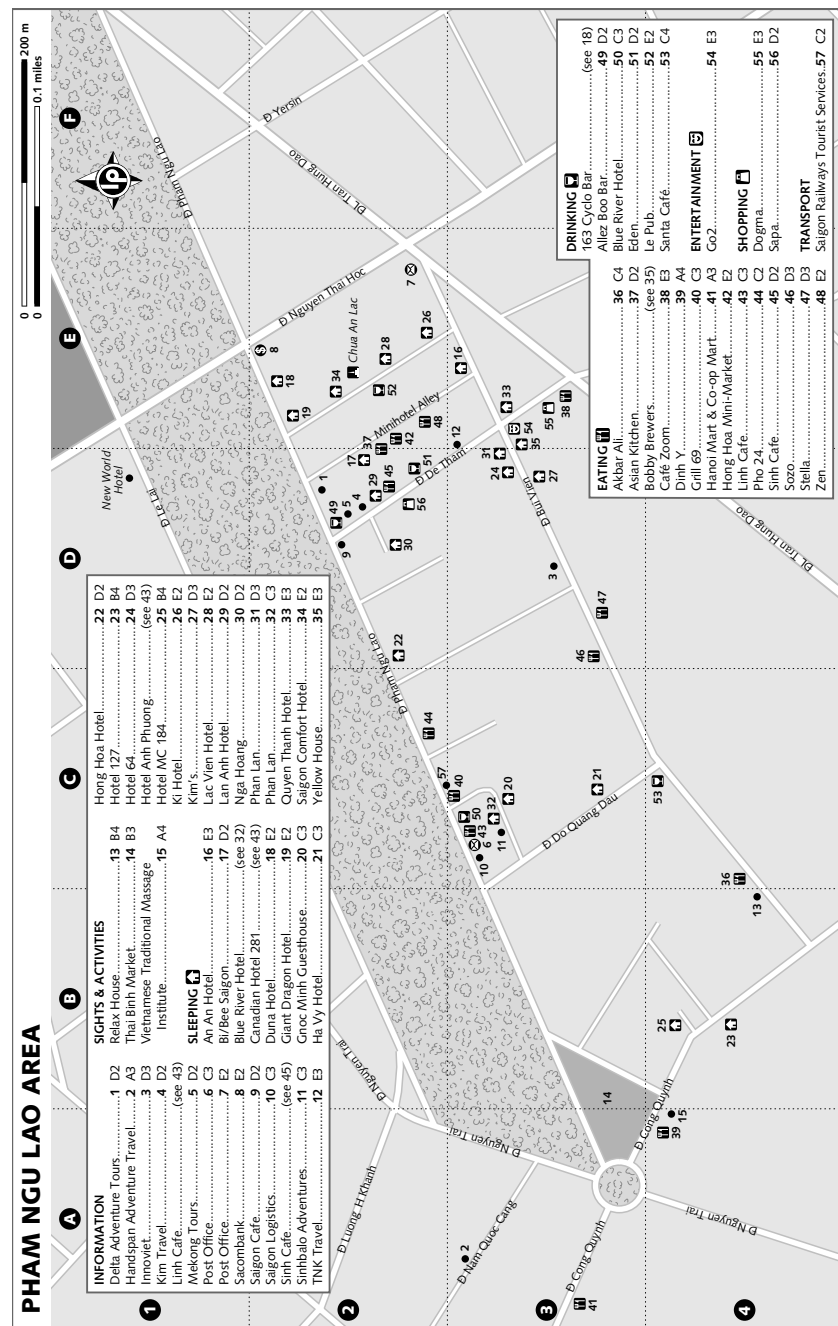
If you don't know where to stay but are limited by budget, take a taxi into Pham Ngu Lao and proceed on foot. Lugging your bags around makes you a prime target for touts – consider dropping your gear at one of the travellers cafés and walking from there. Most won't mind keeping an eye on your luggage for you and they'll be happy to tell you about their tour programmes. If you book ahead, most hotels will fetch you at the airport for around US\$5.

PHAM NGU LAO

Three streets – Đ Pham Ngu Lao, Đ De Tham and Đ Bui Vien – along with intersecting alleys form the heart of this backpacker ghetto, with well over a hundred places to stay. Among the options are countless family-run guesthouses (US\$6 to US\$12), newer, spiffier hotels (US\$10 to US\$25) and even a dorm or two.

Yellow House (Map p357; ☎ 836 8830; yellowhousehotel@yahoo.com; 31 Đ Bui Vien; dm/s/d US\$5/9/12; 🕒) One of the cheapest options in town if you don't mind bunking with strangers, Yellow House has two dormitories (a mixed seven-bed and a three-bed for men or women – whoever arrives first) as well as private rooms. Rooms are basic, but acceptable (some lack windows, some need a scrub) and there's a shared balcony. Breakfast included.

Nga Hoang (Map p357; ☎ 920 3356; www.yellowhouse.vn.com; 269/19 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$8-20; 🕒) Just off Đ De Tham in a small alley, this very clean,



family-run guesthouse is an excellent deal despite the small rooms. Breakfast is included, there's satellite TV and the management is very friendly.

Ha Vy Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 836 9123; www.havyhotel.com; 16-18 Đ Do Quang Dau; r US\$8-12; 📶) This family-run minihotel has an atmospheric lobby and a mix of clean and comfortable rooms, though some could use a bit more light.

Kim's (Map p357; ☎ 836 8584; 91 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$10; 📶) Not part of the ubiquitous brand, Kim's is a small, family-run guesthouse with tidy rooms (furnished with dusty appliances). Front rooms have balconies.

Blue River Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 837 6483; blueriver1126@yahoo.com; 283/2C Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s/d from US\$10/12; 📶) This extra-friendly place has clean, spacious rooms with simple, neat furnishings. Breakfast and free internet included.

Ngoc Minh Guesthouse (Map p357; ☎ 837 6407; ngocminhotel@vnn.vn; 283/11 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$10-12; 📶) Tucked just behind a busy street, this pleasant, colourfully painted guesthouse has clean, trim rooms that are a good value for the money.

Phan Lan (Map p357; ☎ 836 9569; 📶); Đ Pham Ngu Lao (phanlan36@yahoo.com; 283/6 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s/d from US\$10/12); Đ Bui Vien (70 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$10-15; 📶) Another good choice on a quiet street just off busy Pham Ngu Lao, this friendly guesthouse has clean, comfortable rooms and helpful staff. Several blocks away stands Bui Vien Phan Lan offering clean, tidy rooms run by friendly hosts. There's an ATM inside. Breakfast included at both branches.

Quyen Thanh Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 836 8570; quyen Thanhhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 212 Đ De Tham; r US\$10-15; 📶) Goofy green granite tubs, a round terrace and plants adorn this older place situated on a noisy corner. There is an excellent souvenir shop on the ground floor, where you'll find locally made lacquerware, snake wine and various other trinkets.

Lan Anh Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 836 5197; lan-anh-hotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 252 Đ De Tham; r US\$10-18; 📶) Offering an elevator, free breakfast and comfortable rooms, the Lan Anh is a good central choice.

our pick **Madame Cuc's** (madamcuc@hcm.vnn.vn; r US\$12-20; 📶); Hotel 127 (Map p357; ☎ 836 8761; 127 Đ Cong Quynh); Hotel 64 (Map p357; ☎ 836 5073; 64 Đ Bui Vien); Hotel MC 184 (Map p357; ☎ 836 1679; 184 Đ Cong Quynh) It's worth checking out the trio of superb family-run hotels run by warm-hearted Madam Cuc, a local personality who knows how to make her guests feel safe and at home. All three places

feature well-appointed rooms and the staff provide a most welcoming reception. There's free tea, coffee and fruit all day; breakfast and a simple dinner are included in the room rates. Virtually all the hotels are identical in size and style.

Saigon Comfort Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 837 6516; saigoncomfort@hcm.fpt.vn; 175/21 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$12-18; 📶) This clean, comfortable place has nicely set rooms – and they all come with windows. You'll also find a host of decent amenities, including en-suite wi-fi access.

Bi Saigon & Bee Saigon (Map p357; ☎ 836 0678; www.bisaigon.com; r US\$12-30; 📶); Bi Saigon (185/26 Đ Pham Ngu Lao); Bee Saigon (185/16 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) With two locations in Minihotel Alley, this pair of hotels has comfortable rooms with all the amenities (and some wild designs to boot). Each hotel is fronted by a decent restaurant serving Vietnamese and Japanese fare amid French-colonial décor.

Hong Hoa Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 836 1915; www.honghoavn.com; 185/28 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$13-18; 📶) Rooms are trim and tidy at Hong Hoa (the best have small balconies), and guests get two hours free at the internet café downstairs. The staff here are friendly and efficient.

Hotel Anh Phuong (Map p357; ☎ 836 9248; 295 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$15-20; 📶) Prominently advertising its double-glazed windows, this hotel delivers peace and quiet in its range of tidy rooms; the best are spacious, with heavy wooden furniture and Eastern décor.

Canadian Hotel 281 (Map p357; ☎ 837 8666; hotel@281canadianhotel.com; 281 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r US\$15-28; 📶) The lobby resembles an airline booking office, with cool, crisp (Canadian?) design. Some rooms have balconies; for US\$21 and upwards they have in-room computers with fast ADSL connections (US\$2 extra per day). There's a lift to save your legs.

Duna Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 837 3699; dunahotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 167 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; s/d/tr from US\$15/17/25; 📶) This spotless hotel has colourful rooms with elaborately carved moulding and other details. Duna has a lift and accepts credit cards.

CO GIANG AREA

An alternative to Pham Ngu Lao and about 10 minutes' walk south of there, is a string of fine guesthouses in the quiet alley connecting Đ Co Giang and Đ Co Bac (Map p336). To reach the guesthouses, walk southwest on Đ Co Bac and turn left after you pass the *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) shops.

Ngoc Son (Map p336; ☎ 836 4717; ngocsonguesthouse@yahoo.com; 178/32 Đ Co Giang; r US\$7-11; 📶) A quiet, eight-room guesthouse, Ngoc Son is a family-style place offering rooms with cable TV and fridge. The friendly, helpful family rents motorbikes and offers breakfast for US\$1 extra.

Guest House California (Map p336; ☎ 837 8885; guesthousecalifornia-saigon@yahoo.com; 171A Đ Co Bac; r US\$10-18; 📶) Small and intimate, this homey new guesthouse has a relaxed TV area downstairs and a shared kitchen where you can cook your own meals. It's run by a friendly, relaxed couple who also rents bikes and motorbikes.

our pick **Miss Loi's Guesthouse** (Map p336; ☎ 837 9589; missloi@hcm.fpt.vn; 178/20 Đ Co Giang; r US\$10-20; 📶) This was the first guesthouse to appear in the neighbourhood and it's still the best. Miss Loi and her especially amiable, helpful staff create a warm, low-key familial environment. The free breakfast is served in the pleasant open-air lobby, where fat, happy fish populate the fish pond and a pool table awaits.

Midrange

PHAM NGU LAO

Giant Dragon Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 836 1935; gd-hotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 173 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; r/ste US\$20/25; 📶) Fairly fancy, the immaculate rooms at this lift-equipped place have satellite TV, IDD phones, tubs and hair dryers. Superdeluxe rooms have sitting areas and views of town; all room rates include breakfast.

Lac Vien Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 920 4899; lacvienhotel@hcm.fpt.vn; 28/12 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$22-28; 📶) A shiny new hotel, Lac Vien has very clean rooms with attractive furnishings, flat-screen TVs, and modern bathrooms. There's wi-fi access, but the cheapest rooms lack windows.

An An Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 837 8087; www.ananhotel.com; 40 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$22-35; 📶) The usual luxuries such as TV and minibar equip the clean rooms at this slick, newish place. It also offers tours and transport services.

Ki Hotel (Map p357; ☎ 837 5582; www.tamsonco.com; 28/2 Đ Bui Vien; r US\$28-38; 📶) This new hotel offers stylish quarters with red and white embroidered bed covers, organic elements (bamboo, paper lanterns), thoughtful extras (robe and slippers) and room enough to stretch out.

Metropole Hotel (Map p336; ☎ 920 1939; fax 920 1960; 148 Đ Tran Hung Dao; r from US\$55; 📶) Run by Saigon Tourist, this well-appointed hotel has attractive guestrooms and excellent amenities – pool, workout centre, spa.

DONG KHOI AREA

If you want to base yourself in the city centre, you'll find a good number of well-appointed hotels along Đ Dong Khoi or near the Saigon River. All of them offer amenities such as air-con and satellite TV.

our pick **Spring Hotel** (Map p350; ☎ 829 7362; springhotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 44-46 Đ Le Thanh Ton; s/d with breakfast from US\$32/40; 📶) This trim, nicely designed place has a subtle Japanese feel to it. Rooms are somewhat small and carpeted but offer excellent value for the neighbourhood.

Bong Sen Annexe (Map p350; ☎ 823 5818; bong sen2@hcm.vnn.vn; 61-63 Đ Hai Ba Trung; s/d with breakfast from US\$40/46; 📶) The BS, as it's affectionately known by business travellers, is an attractive choice, with friendly management and staff. Rooms are clean, carpeted and somewhat uninspiring – but as with the Spring Hotel, it offers fair value for the neighbourhood.

Asian Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 829 6979; asianhotel@hcm.fpt.vn; 150 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d with breakfast from US\$45/50; 📶) In the centre of town, this contemporary hotel has clean, carpeted rooms with a pleasant if simple design and wi-fi access. Book the superior or deluxe for a balcony and decent natural light. There's a good in-house restaurant.

And a few others in the area:

Dong Do Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 827 3637; www.dongdohotel.com; 35 Đ Mac Thi Bui; r US\$25-40; 📶) Small, simple, quiet rooms here have tile or wood floors; deluxe rooms feel cosy, while standards are a bit barren. Breakfast and in-room ADSL internet connection included.

Huong Sen Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 829 1415; www.vietnamtourism.com/huongsen; 66-70 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d from US\$38/52; 📶) Centrally located with tidy carpeted rooms; breakfast is included. Call ahead for promotional rates.

Kim Long Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 822 8558; kimlonghotel@hcm.vnn.vn; 58 Đ Mac Thi Bui; s/d from US\$22/27; 📶) This small, somewhat dour, hotel has worn rooms with tile floors; front rooms have balconies. In-room internet (ADSL) costs an extra US\$3 per day.

DISTRICT 3

Saigon Star Hotel (Map p336; ☎ 930 6290; www.saigonstarhotel.com.vn; 204 Đ Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; r US\$50-60; 📶) A decent midrange option, Saigon Star has attentive service and chintzy rooms with floral bedspreads and upholstery. The best rooms have balconies overlooking the Cong Vien Van Hoa Park. Its rooftop restaurant has fine views of the Reunification Palace.

CHOLON

Arc En Ciel Hotel (Thien Hong Hotel or Rainbow Hotel; Map p346; ☎ 855 2550; www.arceniel-hotel.com; thienhong@hcm.vnn.vn; 52-56 Đ Tan Đa; r with breakfast US\$35-45; 🏠) Featuring modern rooms with tile floors, the Rainbow is a popular venue for tour groups from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with its Rainbow Disco Karaoke. The priciest rooms come with pretty Chinese carved furniture.

Top End

Nearly all of HCMC's top hotels are concentrated in District 1 and most of them are in the Dong Khoi area. Don't be scared off by the published rates; hefty discounts can often be negotiated. Call or email ahead to ask for the current 'promotional' rates.

Continental Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 829 9252; www.continentalvietnam.com; 132-134 Đ Dong Khoi; r US\$75-135; 🏠) One of the city's most historic lodgings, the Continental was the setting for much of the action that occurred in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*. The hotel dates from the turn of the 19th century and received its last renovation in 1989 (unfortunately, at the hands of its aesthetically challenged owner, Saigon Tourist). Panelled wood ceilings with carved detailing accent the carpeted, cavernous rooms.

Grand Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 823 0163; www.grandhotel.com.vn; 8-24 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d from US\$75/85; 🏠 🏠) Aptly named, the Grand's renovated landmark building is notable for its old-fashioned lift and spacious suites with 4.5m-high ceilings and French windows. Don't bother with modern rooms in the new wing; old-wing rooms are appealing and historic, with parquet wood floors and granite bathrooms. There's also an indoor pool and a gym. Breakfast included.

Rex Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 829 2185; www.rexhotelvietnam.com; 141 ĐL Nguyen Hue; s/d from US\$80/90; 🏠 🏠) The giant Rex is another classic central hotel. Built in 1950, it has an ambience of mellowed kitsch that recalls the time it put up US army officers. Rooms are clean and trim with carpeting; upper-category rooms have views, while standard rooms have only windows opening onto the hall. The Rex has extensive amenities and a rooftop bar, decorated with plaster elephants and birdcages. You can use the swimming pool (open 6am to 9.30pm) for 48,000d.

Renaissance Riverside Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 822 0033; reservations@renaissance-saigon.com; 8-15 Đ Ton Duc Thang; d from US\$115; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Not to be con-

fused with the Riverside Hotel nearby, this glitzy riverside skyscraper offers a luxurious atmosphere and exceptionally friendly service. Stunning, spectacular, right-there river views are worth the extra cash.

Majestic Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 829 5517; www.majestic.saigon.com.vn; 1 Đ Dong Khoi; s/d from US\$135/150; 🏠 🏠) Dating back to 1925, the Majestic is right on the Saigon River. Following major renovations it can truly reclaim its title as one of the city's most majestic hotels. Colonial architecture and details like gorgeous wood floors contribute to its charm and unique atmosphere, setting it apart from the more modern behemoths. On hot afternoons take a dip in the courtyard pool; on warm evenings take in the river views with a cocktail in hand at the top-floor bar. Breakfast is included in room rates.

Park Hyatt Saigon (Map p350; ☎ 824 1234; saigon.park.hyatt.com; 2 Lam Son Sq; d from US\$210; 🏠 🏠 🏠) New in 2006, the Park Hyatt is easily Saigon's finest hotel. Occupying a fine position in the heart of the city, this 252-room hotel has an elegant white façade and beautifully appointed guest rooms. The common areas – including a classically furnished lounge and a cosy top-floor bar – warrant a visit even if you're not staying here. There's an attractive pool, full spa services and all the other amenities you'd expect from this first-rate hotel.

Sheraton Saigon (Map p350; ☎ 827 2828; www.sheraton.com/saigon; 88 Đ Dong Khoi; r from US\$230; 🏠 🏠 🏠) One of the youngest luxury hotels on the block (opened in 2003), the Sheraton boasts lavish rooms with handsome furnishings and all the amenities you'd expect from the big hotel chain – including an excellent spa, an elegant pool and rooftop bar with 360-degree views.

Caravelle Hotel (Map p350; ☎ 823 4999; www.caravellehotel.com; 19 Lam Son Sq; r US\$230-1200; 🏠 🏠 🏠) One of the most luxurious options in HCMC, the Caravelle Hotel has plush spacious rooms with all the creature comforts. It sits on the spot once occupied by the Catholic Diocese of Saigon. The rooftop Saigon Saigon Bar (p366) is a spectacular place to have a cocktail in the early evening. Phone ahead for promotional rates.

EATING

Hanoi may have more lakes and colonial charm, but HCMC is the reigning culinary king of Vietnam. Restaurants here range from dirt-cheap sidewalk stalls to atmospheric

villas, each serving a unique interpretation of Vietnamese decadence. Besides brilliant regional fare, Saigon offers a smattering of world cuisine, with Indian, Japanese, Thai, French, Italian and East-West fusions well represented.

Good foodie neighbourhoods include the Dong Khoi area, with a high density of top-quality restaurants, as well as nearby District 3. Pham Ngu Lao's eateries, attempting to satisfy every possible culinary whim, are generally less impressive. Chinese fare rules Cholon, though restaurants here can seem sparser than pagodas on a casual stroll through the area.

Local Vietnamese restaurants open from 6am to 9pm; gourmet and international restaurants from 11am to 2pm and 6pm to 11pm; street stalls keep all hours; and markets are open from 6.30am to 5.30pm. English menus are common.

Vietnamese

Nam Giao (Map p350; ☎ 825 0261; 136/15 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 10,000-15,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Tucked away in an alley of cosmetic shops near Ben Thanh Market, Nam Giao serves superb Hué-style mains and is always packed with locals. There's a simple photo menu.

ourpick **Quan An Ngoc** (Map p350; ☎ 825 7179; 138 Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 17,000-60,000d; 🍴 lunch & din-

ner) This highly recommended place is where to go for an excellent selection of traditional Vietnamese dishes. Surrounding the garden-style patio is a ring of cooks at individual stations, mixing up their nicely spiced creations in the open air. Take a stroll before ordering, and let your instincts be your guide.

Pho Oso (Map p350; ☎ 829 6415; 37 Đ Dong Khoi; mains 18,000-80,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This tiny noodle shop serves delectable bowls of *pho* amid a cosy setting packed with wooden carvings and antique curios. And remember the Oso mantra: 'no delicious, no pay'.

Banh Xeo 46A (Map p336; ☎ 824 1110; 46A Đ Dinh Cong Trang; mains 20,000-30,000d; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) *Banh xeo*, the Vietnamese rice-flour crêpe stuffed with bean sprouts, prawns and pork (there's also a vegetarian version), has been known to induce swoons of gastronomic delight among certain visitors. Come here to try some of the best *banh xeo* in HCMC.

Pho 24 (Map p357; ☎ 821 36 8122; www.pho24.com.vn; 271 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 24,000d; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Yeah, it's part of a chain, but this polished noodle shop serves fantastic bowls of high-quality *pho* – along with fresh juices and spring rolls. Visit the website for other Pho 24 locations.

Bia Tuoi Pacific (Map p350; ☎ 825 6802; 15 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 35,000-60,000d; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Tucked

DISH BY DISH: SAIGON'S GREATEST HITS

Restaurant-hopping through Saigon's food-filled streets is one of the great pleasures of the Vietnam experience, but with such an array of temptations – and never enough time – the hardest part of full-time feasting may be knowing where to begin. The following (highly subjective) list includes some of our favourite Vietnamese and foreign bites and where to find them. For more on great eating in HCMC, visit www.noodlepie.com, an excellent foodie insider's guide to Saigon written by a *bun cha* (rice vermicelli with roasted pork and vegetables)-loving expat.

- Best *pho* (rice-noodle soup) – **Pho 24** (above)
- Best *banh xeo* (prawn and pork-filled pancake) – **Banh Xeo 46A** (above)
- Best *bo tung xeo* (grilled beef) – **Restaurant 31** (p362)
- Best vegetarian – **Tin Nghia** (p365)
- Best Hué-style cuisine – **Tib Restaurant** (p362)
- Best Vietnamese haute cuisine – **Temple Club** (p362)
- Best street food – the 50-odd stalls of **Ben Than Market** (p372)
- Best Indian – a tie between **Tandoor** (p363) and **Akbar Ali** (p364)
- Best French – **Le Bordeaux** (p363)
- Best durian ice cream – **Fanny** (p365)
- Best setting for *ca phe sua da* (iced milk coffee) – **Serenata** (p365)

dawn an alley, this spacious traditional eatery overlooks several other similar restaurants. Snag a table on the terrace and enjoy fresh crab – one of many seafood specialities.

Restaurant 31 (Map p350; ☎ 825 1330; 31 Đ Ly Tu Trong; ☎ lunch & dinner) This popular outdoor eatery in the city centre serves tasty Vietnamese barbecue. The house speciality is tender marinated beef (30,000đ) that you grill over charcoal right at your table. It's served with salad. There are also good seafood dishes on the menu and the cheerful staff speak English.

Café Zoom (Map p357; 169A Đ De Tham; mains 32,000đ; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This buzzy little place has lots of Vespa style and serves Vietnamese and foreign fare to an equally eclectic crowd.

Gourmet Vietnamese

Compared to what you would pay for fine Vietnamese food abroad, HCMC's better Vietnamese restaurants are a bargain. It's possible to eat like royalty in a lavish restaurant for around US\$10 for lunch – or US\$25 for dinner – per person. Those with a mind for design shouldn't miss the colourful indigenous décor at many of the better places.

Lemon Grass (Map p350; ☎ 822 0496; 4 Đ Nguyen Thiep; mains 50,000-70,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Despite the simple décor, this is one of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the city centre, and you can't go wrong no matter what you order. Reservations essential.

Mandarine (Map p350; ☎ 822 9783; 11A Đ Ngo Van Nam; mains 60,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) The fine selection of traditional dishes on offer draws from southern, central and northern cooking styles. The food is superb, and the pleasant décor and traditional music performances make it an all-round good bet. A house speciality worth trying is the Hanoi-style *cha ca* (filleted fish slices grilled over charcoal).

Hoi An (Map p350; ☎ 823 7694; 11 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 70,000-120,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Just down the street from Mandarin – and run by the same people – is this lovely, Chinese-style place decorated in a classical, antique motif. Hoi An specialises in central Vietnamese and imperial Huế-style dishes, and has the heaviest wooden chairs in Vietnam!

our pick Temple Club (Map p350; ☎ 829 9244; 29 Đ Ton That Thiep; mains 70,000-130,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the second floor of a beautifully restored colonial villa, Temple Club serves delectable Vietnamese plates (such as fish with tamarind

or shrimp in coconut milk) and an assortment of fresh salads. Handsome tile floors and elaborate woodwork set the scene. A comfy lounge for drinks adjoins the space.

Nam Phan (Map p350; ☎ 829 2757; 64 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 80,000-140,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) The location in a handsomely restored mansion fronted by an idyllic courtyard sets the scene for excellent traditional fare. Service is sometimes hit or miss.

our pick Sésame (Map pp334-5; ☎ 899 3378; trianglehvn@hcmc.netnam.vn; 153 Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh, Binh Thanh district; set meals 90,000-120,000đ; ☎ 11.30am-2pm Tue-Fri & 7-10pm Fri & Sat) A hospitality training school for disadvantaged children, Sésame was set up by the French NGO Triangle Génération Humanitaire. Outside on the flagstone patio, bamboo-strip tables await, adorned with candles and fresh flowers. The butter-yellow walls in the dining room are brightly inviting as well. French-Vietnamese dishes made with fresh local ingredients are delicious and beautifully presented, and the sweet staff are eager to please.

Xu (Map p350; ☎ 824 8469; 1st fl, 75 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 90,000-200,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) New in 2006, Xu is a stylishly set dining room that serves up imaginative – and highly successful – Vietnamese dishes. The menu features delicately prepared seafood and grilled meats prepared with a rich mixture of spices. The 95,000đ three-course lunch is a particularly good value.

Tib Restaurant (Map p336; ☎ 829 7242; 187 Đ Hai Ba Trung, District 3; mains around 100,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Housed in a Sino-French villa down a quiet alleyway, Tib does impressive Huế-style dishes and a mean jackfruit salad with grilled sesame. It offers a tasty variety of vegetarian specialities as well.

Nam Kha (Map p350; ☎ 828 8309; 46 Đ Dong Khoi; mains around US\$10; ☎ lunch & dinner) The unique setting here consists of a reflecting pool in the middle of the restaurant flanked by gold-leaf-covered pillars, with tables scattered around the outside. Savoury Vietnamese dishes match the unique setting.

Other Asian

Indian canteen (Map p350; ☎ 823 2159; 66 Đ Dong Du; dishes 7000đ) For really cheap Indian food, seek out this atmospheric, cult-like place behind the Saigon Central Mosque. The fish curry (21,000đ) is lovely. Meals come with free iced tea and bananas.

Giang Nam (Map p346; cnr Đ Tan Hang & Tan Da Đ Hai; mains 15,000đ; ☎ lunch) A hole-in-the-wall diner that's famous for its noodle soups. There's no menu and only one or two dishes a day.

My Huong (Map p346; ☎ 856 3586; 131 Đ Nguyen Tri Phuong; mains 20,000-40,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is a highly popular indoor-outdoor restaurant serving up all kinds of good food, including superb noodle soup with duck.

Mi Nhat So 1 (Map p350; ☎ 930 4839; 8A/5D2 Đ Thai Van Lung; ramen 30,000-42,000đ; ☎ 11.30-2am) This traditional ramen shop serves tasty bowls of the Japanese noodles. Seating is around the small wooden counter.

Sushi Bar (Map p350; ☎ 823 8042; shige@hcm.vnn.vn; 2 Đ Le Thanh Ton; sushi 45,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Bristling with life, this sushi bar is usually packed with Japanese and has a fun view of a frenzied intersection. The restaurant delivers around HCMC until 10pm.

our pick Tandoor (Map p336; ☎ 930 4839; 103 Đ Vo Van Tan, District 3; set lunch 58,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tandoor serves outstanding North Indian food, and the set lunch is particularly good value. Delivery available.

Tiem An Nam Long (Map p346; ☎ 969 4659; 47 Đ Pham Dinh Ho; mains US\$2; ☎ lunch & dinner) Near the Binh Tay Market, Tiem An Nam Long has earned many fans for its tasty wok-fried dishes. There's open-air seating and an English menu with no prices, but everything is cheap.

Urvashi (Map p350; ☎ 821 3102; 27 Đ Hai Trieu; set lunch US\$3-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) Serving some of the best Indian food in District 1, Urvashi prepares a variety of Indian cooking styles and the *thali* lunch is a guaranteed filler.

Other options:

Akatonbo (Map p350; ☎ 824 4928; 36-38 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 60,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Excellent Japanese food and a picture menu.

Ashoka (Map p350; ☎ 823 1372; 17A/10 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 25,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Moderately priced Indian place, with a lunch buffet and halal food.

Com Ga Dong Nguyen (Map p346; ☎ 855 7662; 87-91 Đ Chau Van Liem; mains 15,000-30,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Specialises in tasty roast chicken with rice (*com ga*).

Encore Angkor Plus (Map p350; ☎ 829 8814; 28 Đ Ngo Van Nam; mains 35,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Excellent Khmer food in a peaceful setting.

Hakata (Map p350; ☎ 827 5177; 26 Đ Thi Sach; meals 90,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Some of the best Japanese fare in town.

Hong Phat (Map p346; ☎ 856 7172; 206 Đ Hai Thuong Lan Ong; mains 20,000-30,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) Serves delicious noodle soup with pork.

French

HCMC has a fine selection of French restaurants, from the casual bistro to the exquisite dining room.

L'Étoile (Map p336; ☎ 829 7939; 180 Đ Hai Ba Trung; set meals 15,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) This restaurant serves terrific French food and its all-day 'fast food' menu is good value. A set meal could be roast chicken with a choice of five sauces, a minisalad and baguette.

Le Jardin (Map p350; ☎ 825 8465; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung; mains 35,000-55,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) The charming little bistro has a shaded terrace café in the front garden – it's a popular hang-out for local French expats.

La Niçoise (Map p350; ☎ 822 8613; 42 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; mains 42,000-90,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) This tiny French bistro has just a handful of (mosaic-covered) tables, spilling onto the sidewalk. But it's worth squeezing in for the nicely turned out dishes and changing daily specials (like ravioli with smoked salmon).

Augustin (Map p350; ☎ 829 2941; 10 Đ Nguyen Thiep; mains 60,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Many consider Augustin the city's best casual French restaurant. It serves tasty bistro-style food.

Bi Bi (Map p350; ☎ 829 5783; 8A/8D2 Đ Thai Van Lung; mains 120,000-160,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) The bright Mediterranean décor at Bi Bi creates a pleasant atmosphere for enjoying casual French bistro fare.

La Fourchette (Map p350; ☎ 829 8143; 9 Đ Ngo Duc Ke; mains US\$7; ☎ lunch & dinner) An excellent choice, right in the city centre, La Fourchette serves authentic French food.

Camargue (Map p350; ☎ 824 3148; 16 Đ Cao Ba Quat; mains US\$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Housed in a beautiful restored villa with an open-air terrace, Camargue is also home to trendy Vasco's bar (p366). The menu includes a variety of gourmet dishes complemented by a well-appointed wine list.

Au Manoir de Khai (Map p336; ☎ 930 3394; aumanoir@hcm.vnn.vn; 251 Đ Dien Bien Phu; set lunch/dinner from US\$20/45; ☎ lunch & dinner) This five-star French restaurant is set in a picturesque villa with a lush courtyard and a lavish interior. It was opened by the Vietnamese fashion guru Khai (the brains behind Khai Silk and a string of other superb restaurants and hotels in Vietnam).

Le Bordeaux (Map pp334-5; ☎ 899 9831; 7-8 Đ D2, Binh Thanh district; mains 150,000-300,000đ; ☎ lunch & dinner) For a decadent meal with a five-star price tag, Le Bordeaux is the place to go. The city's

best French restaurant serves delicate scallops, mouth-watering sea bass and other perfectly prepared dishes. It's a few kilometres north of the centre, so reserve before you taxi out.

International Cuisine

Western backpackers tend to easily outnumber the Vietnamese on Đ Pham Ngu Lao and Đ De Tham, which is the axis of HCMC's budget-eatery haven; indeed, the locals have trouble figuring out the menus (banana muesli does not translate well into Vietnamese).

ABC Restaurant (Map p336; ☎ 823 0388; 172H Đ Nguyen Dinh Chieu, District 3; mains 25,000-50,000d; ☎ to 3am) A trendy joint for tasty late-night chow, ABC has indoor and outdoor seating and an extensive menu – from noodle soup and fresh seafood to juicy steaks.

Asian Kitchen (Map p357; ☎ 836 7397; 185/22 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 30,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This small, bamboo-walled eatery serves tasty dishes of Indian, Japanese and vegetarian provenance. There are a few al-fresco tables on the mosaic patio in front.

Mogambo (Map p350; ☎ 825 1311; 20B Đ Thi Sach; mains 30,000-50,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Noted for its Polynesian décor and juicy burgers, Mogambo is a restaurant, pub and hotel.

Skewers (Map p350; ☎ 829 2216; 8A/1/D2 Đ Thai Van Lung; mains 35,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Skewers specialises in Mediterranean cuisine from Greece to Algeria, notably barbecued skewered meat. There's a nice atmosphere and an open kitchen so you can watch the cooks at work.

Grill 69 (Map p357; ☎ 836 7936; 275H Đ Pham Nu Lao; mains 35,000-80,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sizzling barbecued meat is the name of the game at this trim and stylish, four-storey restaurant. Grilled kangaroo, ostrich and more pedestrian fare (pork, squid, beef) go nicely with the wine selections. Roof terrace.

Pau Hanna (Map p350; 15/1 Đ Le Thanh Ton; mains 35,000-105,000d; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) This pleasant Hawaiian-owned bistro and bar features eclectic daily specials (pork ribs, quesadillas, bean soup), as well as burgers and vegetarian fare. Head upstairs for a comfier lounge setting – a good place for an evening cocktail.

Annie's Pizza (Map p350; ☎ 823 9044; 45 Đ Mac Thi Bui; pizzas 40,000-70,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Continuing a yummy pizza tradition, Annie's offers free delivery.

our pick Akbar Ali (Map p357; ☎ 836 4205; 240 Đ Bui Vien; mains around 55,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Popular with the Indian expat community, Akbar Ali

serves up authentic Indian cuisine to the backdrop of a Bollywood video playing discreetly overhead. You'll also find colourful artwork on the walls and friendly service.

Santa Lucia (Map p350; ☎ 822 6562; 14 Đ Nguyen Hue; mains 60,000-100,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Santa Lucia dishes up some of the best authentic Italian food in town.

Pacharan (Map p350; ☎ 825 6824; 97 Đ Hai Ba Trung; tapas 75,000-90,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) This colourful Spanish tapas restaurant and wine bar is one of Saigon's trendiest spots to meet up over a drink. Tasty bites, excellent wines and a rooftop terrace have earned many expat fans. For heartier meals, try the paella (390,000d), which serves two.

Stella (Map p357; ☎ 836 9220; 121 Đ Bui Vien; mains 75,000-125,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) A newcomer to backpacker land, Stella serves delectable risotto, lasagne and gnocchi in a stylish, Zen-like trattoria. Zippy cappuccinos and espressos on hand.

Pomodoro (Map p350; ☎ 823 8998; 79 Đ Hai Ba Trung; mains 80,000-160,000d; ☎ 10am-10pm) This small Italian restaurant has an arched ceiling and an all-brick interior, a cosy setting for good pizzas, pastas, spinach tart (along with other veggie options) and tiramisu. Delivery available.

Gartenstadt (Map p350; ☎ 822 3623; 34 Đ Dong Khoi; mains 125,000-160,000; ☎ 10.30am-midnight) This cosy little place makes its own bread and German sausages.

Au Lac do Brasil (Map p336; ☎ 820 7157; 238 Đ Pasteur; set dinner 290,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) For a taste of Brazil head to Au Lac do Brasil. Decked out with photos of Brazilian cities and colourful Carnival-themed paintings, this *churrascaria* (barbecue restaurant) serves all-you-can-eat steak (and 11 other cuts of meat), just like you'll find in Rio.

Other popular backpacker cafés:

Kim Cafe (Map p357; ☎ 836 8122; cafékim@hcm.vnn.vn; 268 Đ De Tham; mains 20,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

Linh Cafe (Map p357; 291 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 20,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

Saigon Cafe (Map p357; 195 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

Vegetarian

The largest concentration of vegetarian restaurants is around the Pham Ngu Lao area.

Dinh Y (Map p357; ☎ 836 7715; 171B Đ Cong Quynh; mains 7000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Across the road from Thai Binh Market, Dinh Y is run by a friendly Cao Dai family. It serves inex-

pensive and delicious veggie fare, and has an English menu. The noodle soups are savoury and satisfying.

our pick Tin Nghia (Map p357; ☎ 821 2538; 9 Đ Tran Hung Dao; ☎ 7am-8.30pm; mains 8000d) Although you may feel like you're eating in a garage, the owners are strict Buddhists who turn out delicious traditional Vietnamese food, prepared with tofu, mushrooms and other vegetables.

Zen (Map p357; ☎ 837 3713; 185/30 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; mains 10,000-15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This casual backpackers' favourite serves cheap veggie food with a mellow, family atmosphere.

On the first and 15th days of the lunar month, food stalls around the city, especially in the markets, serve vegetarian versions of meaty Vietnamese dishes. While these stalls are quick to serve, they're usually swamped on these special days. Have a little patience; dinner's worth the wait.

Cafés, Bakeries & Ice Cream

Serenata (Map p336; ☎ 930 7436; 6Đ Ngo Thoi Thien; ☎ 7.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Down an alley, Serenata is a beautiful setting for coffee. Tables are scattered around a lush, pond-filled courtyard and inside a charming villa. It's a popular drinking spot for couples at night with live music some nights.

Sozo (Map p357; ☎ 095 870 6580; 176 Đ Bui Vien; 3 cookies US\$1; ☎ 7.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) This lovely, inviting café serves coffees, cinnamon rolls, homemade cookies and sandwiches; it has wi-fi access, and more importantly, trains and employs poor, disadvantaged Vietnamese.

Bobby Brewers (Map p357; ☎ 610 2220; 45 Đ Bui Vien; coffee US\$1-2.30; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This multi-level café shows free movies throughout the week. The menu features coffees, fresh juices, sandwiches, burgers and salads. Free delivery in District 1 (US\$3 minimum).

Fanny (Map p350; ☎ 821 1633; 29-31 Đ Ton That Thiep; per ice-cream scoop 6000-15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Set in an attractive French villa with a brick patio, Fanny creates excellent Franco-Vietnamese ice cream of many sublime tropical fruit flavours (try the durian or litchi). Wi-fi access.

Pat à Chou (Map p350; 65 Đ Hai Ba Trung; croissants 7500d; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) Popular with locals and expats, this tiny bakery sells delightfully fresh baguettes, *pain au chocolat* (pastry with chocolate) and other Francophile morsels.

Givral (Map p350; ☎ 829 2747; 169 Đ Dong Khoi; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A comfortable, central

place to take in views of the Municipal Theatre over pastry (10,000d) and coffee.

Sinh Café (Map p357; ☎ 836 7338; sinhcafevietnam@hcm.vnn.vn; 246-248 Đ De Tham; mains 20,000-40,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sinh has tasty fresh croissants and *pain au chocolat* as well as sandwiches, juices and Vietnamese fare.

Broadard Café (Map p350; ☎ 822 3966; 131 Đ Dong Khoi; mains 25,000-100,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Parisian-style oldie but goodie is known for good café food at OK prices.

Paris Deli (Map p350; ☎ 821 6127; 65 Đ Le Loi; cappuccino 28,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This airy café serves excellent pastries in a cosy setting. Fresh flowers adorn the tables, and there's outdoor seating. Heartier European cuisine also served.

Highlands Coffee (Map p350; Lam Son Sq; smoothies 34,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Part of the large chain, this pleasant outdoor café lies behind the Municipal Theatre and serves strong coffee and refreshing smoothies to the backdrop of electronic music and the surrounding traffic.

Java Coffee Bar (Map p350; ☎ 823 0187; 38-42 Đ Dong Du; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) With espresso bar, excellent café fare and even smoothies (35,000d) made with silken tofu, Java is chic and relaxed – with the comfiest chairs ever.

Ciao Café (Map p350; ☎ 823 1130; 74 Đ Nguyen Hue; snacks around 50,000; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) Set with some lovely tile floors and a lavish wood interior, this is a choice place to sip dark, rich coffee and while away the day with a good book.

DesignED Café (Map p336; ☎ 930 2600; 180A Đ Nam Ky Khoi Nghia; mains 45,000-90,000d; ☎ lunch & dinner) Lunching here on gourmet European and Vietnamese dishes is like dining in a museum café. In fact, upstairs it's an interior design gallery; if you're into Pop Art and sleek Lucite furniture, this is the place for you.

Gallery Deli (Map p350; ☎ 822 2312; 83 Đ Dong Khoi; ☎ 7.30am-11pm; ☎) This atmospheric café has colourful artwork lining the walls (all for sale) and prepares tasty snacks and light meals. Internet available (US\$2 per hour).

Food Stalls

Noodle soup is available all day long at street stalls everywhere. A large bowl of delicious beef noodle soup usually costs between 7000d and 15,000d. Just look for the signs that say 'pho'.

Pho 2000 (Map p336; ☎ 822 2788; 1-3 Đ Phan Chu Trinh; pho 20,000d; ☎ 6am-2am) Near the Ben Thanh Market, Pho 2000 is a good place to sample

your first bowl of *pho* – former US president Bill Clinton stopped in for a bowl.

Pho Hoa (Map p336; ☎ 829 7943; 260C Đ Pasteur; soup 15,000d; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is another popular place with foreigners in District 3.

Markets always have a side selection of food items, often on the ground floor. Clusters of food stalls can be found in Thai Binh, Ben Thanh (Map p336) and An Dong Markets (Map pp334–5).

Sandwiches with a French look and a very Vietnamese taste are sold by street vendors. Fresh baguettes are stuffed with something resembling *pâté* (don't ask) and cucumbers seasoned with soy sauce. A sandwich costs between 5000d and 15,000d, depending on the fillings. Sandwiches filled with imported French cheese cost a little more. À la carte baguettes usually cost between 500d and 2000d.

Self-Catering

The city's markets and street stalls are a great place to assemble a fresh meal. If you don't feel like going anywhere, **Chez Guido** (☎ 898 3747; www.chezguido.com; mains 20,000-100,000d; ☎ 9am-11pm) delivers, fast (even wines and desserts)! The menu offers a mind-boggling cornucopia of international cuisine but specialises in Italian food. Download a menu online.

Two big supermarkets near Pham Ngu Lao are **Hanoi Mart** and **Co-op Mart** (Map p357; Đ Cong Quynh), just down the street from each other.

Other places to try:

Annam Gourmet Shop (Map p350; 16 Đ Hai Ba Trung; ☎ 9am-8pm) A small but well-stocked shop with imported

cheeses, wines, chocolates and all the other delicacies you won't find elsewhere.

Hong Hoa Mini-Market (Map p357; Hong Hoa Hotel, 185/28 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; ☎ 9am-8pm) Small but packed with toiletries, alcohol and Western junk food, such as chocolate bars.

Veggy's (Map p350; ☎ 823 8526; golden-garden@hcm.vnn.vn; 15 Đ Thai Van Lung; ☎ 9am-8pm) Carries a quality variety of imported foods, wine and sauces, as well as fresh produce and frozen meats.

DRINKING

Wartime Saigon was known for its riotous nightlife. Liberation in 1975 put a real dampener on evening activities, but the pubs and discos have staged a comeback. However, periodic 'crack-down, clean-up' campaigns – allegedly to control drugs, prostitution and excessive noise – continue to keep the city's nightlife on the quiet side.

Pubs & Bars

HCMC's widest and wildest variety of nightlife choices is in the central area, notably around Đ Dong Khoi. Although places in this area typically close by midnight (owing to pressure from local authorities), you can always depend on the pubs in the Pham Ngu Lao area to stay open till the wee hours.

CENTRAL AREA

Vasco's (Map p350; ☎ 824 3148; 16 Đ Cao Ba Quat; drinks 20,000-70,000d) Much loved by expats, perennially hip Vasco's draws a bigger crowd on weekends when there's live music. There are

several nice pool tables indoors and out, and inviting tables in the villa courtyard.

Lush (Map p336; ☎ 903 155 461; 2 Đ Ly Tu Trong; drinks 40,000-80,000d) This is an animé-themed bar that gathers an attractive, mixed crowd. The wraparound bar takes centre stage, from which you can enjoy great people-watching and a danceable mix of beats – but there's no dance floor. Pool tables and a 2nd-floor bar are hidden out back.

Carmen (Map p336; ☎ 829 7699; 8 Đ Ly Tu Trong; drinks 20,000-50,000d) One of HCMC's rarer breeds, Carmen has a stone wall exterior and a cosy wine cellarlike interior (duck your head when you enter) with live music nightly (from 7pm-9pm) – often flamenco, hence the name.

Yoko (Map p336; ☎ 933 0577; 22A Đ Nguyen Thi Dieu; drinks 40,000-80,000d) This stylish little spot features live music (from indie rock to American Country to eclectic world beats) most nights starting around 9pm. It has a tiny stage, comfy chairs and a changing assortment of artwork, plus the photo/shrine to John Lennon.

Manna (Map p350; ☎ 823 3978; 26 Đ HH Nghiep; drinks 40,000-80,000d) This shimmering 2nd-floor bar has a wall of windows, comfy lounge chairs (in purplish hues) and a well-dressed local and expat mix who come for the good-time beats and stylish setting.

Q Bar (Map p350; ☎ 823 3479; 7 Lam Son Sq; drinks 20,000-70,000d) Attracting a sophisticated clientele for cocktails, Q Bar is where HCMC's fashion-conscious, alternative crowd hangs out. The stylish décor is cool and minimalist, and the music is hip. It's on the side of the Municipal Theatre, across from the Caravelle Hotel.

Qing (Map p350; ☎ 823 2414; 31 Đ Dong Du) This slim, nicely designed bar has a classic red finish and atmospheric lighting. Qing gathers an assortment of travellers, expats and locals. There's a good wine and food selection (fusion, Asian tapas) and a decent salon (p353) upstairs.

Hoa Vien (Map p336; ☎ 829 0585; www.hoavien.com; 28 Đ Mac Dinh Chi; half-litre beer 24,000d) Though Hoa Vien is notable for being HCMC's only Czech restaurant, the big drawcard is the draught Czech lager. This is actually a brewery, with shiny copper tanks looming behind the busy bar.

Blue Gecko Bar (Map p350; ☎ 824 3483; 31 Đ Ly Tu Trong) This major Aussie hang-out has the coldest beer in town. The music is good and you can shoot pool or watch sport on the half-dozen or so TVs.

Sheridan's Irish House (Map p350; ☎ 823 0973; 17/13 Đ Le Thanh Ton; ☎ 11am-late) This traditional Irish pub seems beamed straight from the backstreets of Dublin; it has live music nightly and good pub grub.

Saigon Saigon Bar (Map p350; ☎ 823 3479; 10th fl, Caravelle Hotel, 19 Lam Son Sq; drinks 25,000-70,000d; ☎ 11am-late) For excellent views in the city centre, stop by Saigon Saigon for a drink around dusk. This fancy bar has live music, cool breezes and a casually upscale feel.

No 5 Ly Tu Trong (Map p336; ☎ 825 6300; 5 Đ Ly Tu Trong; drinks 15,000-70,000d) The décor of this restored French-colonial villa is stylish and sleek. Good music, food, beer, pool and friendly staff all contribute to the pleasant atmosphere.

Heart of Darkness (Map p350; ☎ 823 1080; 17B Đ Le Thanh Ton; drinks 25,000-60,000d) This dark, cavernlike bar is a mostly expat affair. There's a DJ presiding over a small dance floor in the back room.

Wild Horse Saloon (Map p350; ☎ 825 1901; 8A/D1 Đ Thai Van Lung) Living up to its name, this saloon has cowboy chic and a decent beer selection.

PHAM NGU LAO

When it comes to nightlife, the Pham Ngu Lao area has several hot spots, in addition to the always jumping travellers-café scene.

Le Pub (Map p357; ☎ 837 7679; www.lepub.org; 175/22 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) New in 2006, this attractive bar is the new expat favourite in Pham Ngu Lao area. It has deep red walls and a small brick patio in front, a fine vantage point for watching the action in backpacker central.

Allez Boo Bar (Map p357; ☎ 837 2505; 187 Đ Pham Ngu Lao; beer from 12,000d) Watch the world scooter by at this bamboo-decked bar that always packs a (foreign) crowd, with a handful of prostitutes thrown in for good measure.

Eden (Map p357; ☎ 836 8154; 185/22 Đ Tham; mains 30,000-60,000d) This multilevel spot has red lanterns over the bar, a cosy, inviting vibe and staff dressed in shimmering *ao dai* (Vietnamese national dress). Huge menu with all the Asian accents, with tastier fare than neighbouring joints can offer.

163 Cydo Bar (Map p357; ☎ 920 1567; 163 Đ Pham Ngu Lao) Bar snacks range from tempura to sandwiches to *pho*, and live music (every night except for Sunday) covers the gamut from flamenco to pop.

Santa Café (Map p357; cnr Đ Bui Vien & Đ Do Quang Dau) Divey little place with outdoor seating that's a favourite of the backpacker crowd.

DRINKS WITH A VIEW

Although you'll pay more for a cocktail at these rooftop bars than at street level, it's well worth the extra dong – what better way to enjoy the frenetic pace of life on the streets, than at eagles'-nest heights? Among our favourite spots at sunset:

Caravelle Hotel (p360; ☎ 11am-late) A bit stylish but staid, Caravelle's Saigon Saigon Bar has great views and space for open-air intrigue. Live entertainment most nights.

Hotel Majestic (p360; ☎ 4pm-midnight) Among the best places in Saigon for a relaxing sundowner, the Majestic's top-floor Bellevue Bar offers exquisite views of the river among old-world opulence. If the heady heights make you feel too woozy or blasé, head down to the ground-level Cyclo Bar, with ringside views of motorcycle mayhem.

Rex Hotel (p360; ☎ 4-10pm) The Rex wins the kitsch award, featuring plaster animals, empty birdcages and various other...junk, but did we mention the view?

Sheraton Saigon (p360; ☎ 4pm-midnight) A fancy-shmancy wine bar on the 23rd floor with live music and a top-notch restaurant attached.

Windsor Plaza Hotel (Map p346; ☎ 833 6688; 18 Đ An Duong Vuong, District 5; ☎ 5-11pm) For an alternative view, head to the 24th floor of this looming new hotel in Cholon. Its 360-degree views give a nice perspective of the central business district.

MOTORBIKE MELODY

One of the great embracers of motorbike culture, HCMC has some surreal vantage points to watch the endless procession of passing two-wheelers. Dong Khoi area is a particularly fine place to be on weekend and holiday nights, when the streets fill with cruisers of all ages and styles. Everyone's dressed to impress, with two, three or four packed to a bike, and you can almost taste the electricity in the air (or are those fumes?) as the young and restless check each other out through the handlebars of their matching Honda Futures. The mass of slow-rolling humanity is so thick on Đ Dong Khoi that crossing the street is like moving (cautiously, mind you) through a swarm of honeybees. Despite the apparent chaos of 10 or more lanes of traffic spinning toward each other at each intersection, most of the time, the swarms part and the motorbikes glide smoothly around each other like some strange choreography of vehicular ballet.

Even if you don't want to join the parade, you can still get some great seats to the nightly streetside spectacle. Here are some of our favourite places in town to catch the action (which is far better than TV – and most organised sporting events for that matter).

- **Highlands Coffee** (p365) Hands down, one of the best motorbike vantage points in the country.
- **Traffic circle** (Map p336; cnr Pham Ngoc Thach & Tran Cao Van) Ringed with cafés and restaurants, there's never a dull moment at this attractively landscaped traffic circle (some even call it 'Turtle Circle').
- **Cyclo Bar** (Map p350; 1 Đ Dong Khoi) On the ground floor of the Majestic Hotel, Cyclo Bar is one of the fancier places to watch/hear the engines roar.
- **Café Zoom** (p362) Dedicated to the artfully designed Vespa, this unpretentious café has wondrous views of a city in motion.
- **Allez Boo Bar** (p367) One of the busiest corners in backpackerville; grab a (premium) seat outside and enjoy.
- **Santa Café** (p367) Not so many motorbikes, but still a great spot for people-watching.

ENTERTAINMENT

Pick up the *Guide* or *Time Out* (see p336) to find out what's on during your stay in Saigon. Monthly listings include art shows, live music and theatre performances happening around town. You can also stop by the Municipal Theatre (p344) to see what's on, as it often stages worthwhile plays and musical and dance performances.

Binh Quoi Tourist Village (☎ 899 1831, dinner cruise bookings ☎ 829 8914; www.binhquoiresort.com.vn; 1147 Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh, Binh Thanh district; boat rides 20,000-840,000d, dinner adult/child 75,000/45,000d; 🕒 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Sun & holidays, buffet dinner 5-8pm Sat) This 'village' is essentially a resort run by Saigon Tourist, with boat rides, water-puppet shows, tennis courts and amusements for the kids. The weekend buffet dinner, with a dazzling variety of traditional Vietnamese regional specialities, is served along a canal lit with floating lanterns and accompanied by live traditional music. Call for the latest schedule of performances.

The park puts in a plug for Vietnam's ethnic minorities by staging their traditional

weddings accompanied by folk music. If you don't mind getting carted around on a tour package, the dinner cruises can be fun and are followed by a traditional music or water-puppet performance at the village.

Binh Quoi Tourist Village is 8km north of central HCMC. You can get here by motorbike or taxi (around 60,000d).

Maxim's Dinner Theatre (Map p350; ☎ 829 6676; 15 Đ Dong Khoi; 🕒 11am-11pm) A Saigon institution next to the Majestic Hotel, this supper club is better recommended for its music performances than for the food. The menu offers Vietnamese, Chinese and Western dishes; though the sea slug may disappoint, the crème caramel definitely won't. The live music goes from Vietnamese folk to show tunes to contemporary pop, and reservations are recommended for dinner.

Cinemas

There are plenty of cinemas (*rap*) in the city centre, but very few films are shown in languages other than Vietnamese.

Foreign-language cinemas:

Diamond Plaza Cinema (Map p350; ☎ 825 7751; Diamond Plaza, 163 Đ Dong Khoi; tickets 30,000-40,000d) English-language films.

Institute of Cultural Exchange with France (Idecaf) (Map p350; ☎ 829 5451; 31 Đ Thai Van Lung) Screens French-language films; videos also available to rent.

Nightclubs

Most of the following dance clubs don't get started until midnight; ask around Pham Ngu Lao bars about the newest hot spots.

Apocalypse Now (Map p350; ☎ 824 1463; 2C Đ Thi Sach) Dance clubs in Vietnam have a tendency to change with the wind, but 'Apo' is one exception to the rule. It's been around forever and gives a good eyeful of the seamier side of international relations. The music is loud, the patrons are from all walks of life and it's apocalyptically rowdy.

Go2 (Map p357; ☎ 836 9575; 187 Đ De Tham) Above an open, airy street-level bar, this popular nightclub gathers a good mix of expats and young Saigon party people. DJs spin a good collection of electronica and Anglo pop, and there are open-air spots where you can retreat when you need a break from dancing.

Tropical Rainforest Disco (Mua Rung; Map p350; ☎ 825 7783; 5-15 Đ Ho Huan Nghiep; cover US\$4) This popular nightspot in the city centre attracts a younger crowd. The cover charge entitles you to one free drink.

Underground (Map p350; ☎ 829 9079; 69 Đ Dong Khoi; 🕒 10am-midnight) Named after the London tube, Underground is located in the basement of the Lucky Plaza building and is a popular gathering spot for expats and travellers alike.

GAY & LESBIAN HO CHI MINH CITY

Though there are few openly gay venues, Saigon's popular bars and clubs are generally gay-friendly. A good mixed bar to check out in Pham Ngu Lao area is **Eden** (p367), which attracts a mostly straight crowd, but is gay-friendly nonetheless. In Dong Khoi area, **Lush** (p367) attracts a good, mixed crowd with danceable music but it doesn't have a dance floor. **Apocalypse Now** (above) attracts a small gay contingent among an otherwise straight crowd, with solid grooves and a spacious dance floor. **Samsara** (Map p350; ☎ 862 2630; 2nd fl, 131 Đ Dong Khoi), above the Brodard Café is a mostly gay affair, with waiters in shirtless vests, good DJs and an action-packed dance floor. Friday and Saturday nights are the time to go. Another popular local spot that gathers mostly gays and a few lesbians is **Ben Thanh** (Orient Club; Map p336; 6 Đ Mac Dinh Chi; cover 45,000d) on Monday nights, with a lively, dance-prone vibe.

A word of warning regarding masseurs: masseurs travel on bicycle through the streets of Pham Ngu Lao area, rattling a small bell to announce their services. They often offer US\$2 massages along with other services, but some of them try to extort money afterwards. As things can sometimes get nasty, it's best to avoid them altogether.

There's a good happy hour (15,000d draught beer) and decent pizza.

Theatre

Municipal Theatre (Map p350; Nha Hat Thanh Pho; Map p350; ☎ 829 9976; Đ Dong Khoi) Each week the theatre has a different programme, such as Eastern European-style gymnastics, classical music or traditional Vietnamese theatre. Performances typically begin at 8pm; inquire at the theatre or ask at your hotel. And if there's nothing happening when you're in town, you can at least pop into the stylish Q Bar, around the side of the building, for a drink.

Conservatory of Music (Nhac Vien Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh; Map p336; ☎ 824 3774; 112 Đ Nguyen Du; 🎵 performances 7.30pm Mon-Fri (Mar-May & Oct-Dec) Performances of both traditional Vietnamese and Western classical music are held at the conservatory, near Reunification Palace. Students aged seven to 16 attend the conservatory, which performs all the functions of a public school in addition to providing instruction in music. The music teachers here were trained abroad. The school is free, but most of the students come from well-off families who can afford to purchase the prerequisite musical instruments.

Water Puppets

Although it originates in the north, the art has migrated to HCMC in the last decade – in part because of its popularity with tourists. There are two venues to see water puppets in HCMC: on the grounds of the **War Remnants Museum** (Bao Tang Chung Tich Chien Tranh; Map p336; ☎ 829 8496; 28 Đ Vo Van Tan; admission 30,000d; 🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm) and at the **History Museum** (Bao Tang Lich

Su; Map p336; ☎ 829 8146; Đ Nguyen Binh Khiem; admission 30,000đ; ☎ 8-11am & 1.30-4pm Tue-Sun; schedules vary, but shows tend to start when a group of five or more customers has assembled. Expect a 20-minute show, performed by truly skilled and imaginative puppeteers.

Saigon Race Track

Saigon Race Track (Cau Lac Bo Tho Thao Phu To; Map pp334-5; ☎ 855 1205; 2 Đ Le Dai Hanh, District 11; admission 2000đ; ☎ 12.30-7pm Sat & Sun) When South Vietnam was liberated in 1975, one of the Hanoi government's policies was to ban debauched, capitalistic pastimes such as gambling. Horse-racing tracks – mostly found in the Saigon area – were shut down. However, the government's need for hard cash has caused a rethink. Like the state lottery, the track has proved extremely lucrative.

Dating from around 1900, the track reopened in 1989. But grumbling about just where the money is going has been coupled with widespread allegations about the druging of horses. The minimum legal age for jockeys is 14 years; many look like they're pushing 10.

The overwhelming majority of gamblers are Vietnamese though there is no rule prohibiting foreigners from joining in the fun of risking their dong. The minimum legal bet is 2000đ and, for the high rollers hoping to become a dong billionaire, the sky's the limit.

Plans to introduce off-track betting have so far not materialised. However, illegal book-making (bets can be placed in gold!) does offer one form of competition to the government-owned monopoly.

SHOPPING

HCMC's teeming streets are like the Elysian Fields for intrepid shopping souls. While there's much junk being peddled to the tour-

ist masses, there are plenty of great discoveries just waiting to be unearthed. Comprising the hunting grounds are sprawling markets, antique stores, silk and fabric boutiques and speciality stores selling ceramics, ethnic fabrics, lacquered bamboo and custom-made clothing. And although the art scene is better up north, HCMC has a growing number of galleries selling everything from lavish oil paintings to photographs to vintage propaganda posters.

There are also the quirkiest gems like *cyclos* and helicopters made from beer and soda cans – one place to browse for these is at the War Remnants Museum (p340) gift shop.

The best place to begin any shopping journey is the gallery- and boutique-lined Đ Dong Khoi and the streets that intersect it. This is also the place to look for high-quality souvenirs. Better deals can be found in Pham Ngu Lao, although the selection is poorer. If you're pressed for time, several shopping centres are great one-stop destinations, including the shiny, modern **Saigon Centre** (Map p350; 65 Đ Le Loi); and the inspiringly named (and cheaper) **Tax Department Store** (Russian Market; Map p350; nr Đ Nguyen Hue & Đ Le Loi), both are great places to browse for electronics, clothing and handicrafts.

Arts & Handicrafts

Dogma (Map p357; ☎ ; www.dogmavietnam.com; 175 Đ De Tham; ☎ 9am-10pm) Proudly advertising the sale of Vietnamese kitsch, this colourful store stocks reproductions of marvellous old propaganda posters emblazoned on coffee mugs, coasters, and T-shirts. There's also men's and women's clothing, purses and assorted other knock-knacks that make for fine browsing.

Living & Giving (Map p350; ☎ 822 3104; www.livinggiving.com; 11 Đ Ngo Duc Ke) Packed with stylish linens and bedding, furniture and unusual home décor in iron, wood and ceramic.

Lotus (Map p350; ☎ 098 908 4449; lotushochiminh@yahoo.com; 25 Đ Dong Khoi) For vintage propaganda

posters (from the '60s and '70s), this place is a goldmine. Expect to pay upwards of US\$85 for an original.

Mai Handicrafts (Map pp334-5; ☎ 844 0988; maivn@hcm.vnn.vn; 298 Đ Nguyen Trong Tuyen, Tan Binh district) Fair-trade shop dealing in ceramics, ethnic fabrics and other gift items, in turn supporting disadvantaged families and street children.

Nguyen Freres (Map p350; ☎ 098 380 3070; nguyenfreres.com; 2 Đ Dong Khoi) Stocks a lovely assortment of antique furnishings and textiles, pillowcases, silks, pottery and lamps.

Precious Qui (Map p350; quasarkhanh@hcm.vnn.vn; ☎ 825 6817; 29A Đ Dong Khoi) Precious Qui specialises in lacquerware and accessories (interesting forks and spoons) fashioned from buffalo horn. It also stocks a limited selection of celadon ceramic ware.

Clothing

Although Saigonese fashion has yet to make a name for itself, there are plenty of places where you can shop for stylish apparel – or even opt for a custom-made *ao dai*, the couture symbol of Vietnam. This quite flattering outfit of silk tunic and trousers is tailored at shops in and around Ben Thanh Market and around the Rex and Continental Hotels. There are also male *ao dai* available – these are a looser fit and come with a silk-covered head wrap to match.

Cham Khanh (Map p336; ☎ 820 6861; 256 Đ Pasteur, District 3) This is one of several *ao dai* shops on this stretch of Đ Pasteur. It sells particularly colourful pieces and is a reliable place for getting an *ao dai* made.

The Dong Khoi neighbourhood is awash with tempting shops selling contemporary clothing. Some will also custom-tailor clothing and shoes, and turnaround usually takes a few days. A survey of the neighbourhood around Đ Pasteur and Đ Le Thanh Ton yields at least a half-dozen boutiques; Đ Dong Khoi and Đ Ngo Duc Ke or Đ Dong Du reveal yet more.

Souvenir T-shirts are prevalent in town, with bargain deals available from vendors along Đ Le Loi in the city centre, or Đ De Tham in the Pham Ngu Lao area. Prices start at US\$2 for a printed T-shirt and US\$4 for an embroidered one.

Other clothing stores:

Chi Chi (Map p350; ☎ 824 7812; anhxuanvn@hcm.fpt.vn; 138 Đ Pasteur; ☎ 8am-8pm) Features well-chosen, lovely fabrics and fine designs; custom-tailoring offered here.

Khai Silk (Map p350; ☎ 829 1146; www.khaisilk.org; 107 Đ Dong Khoi) One branch of this well-established silk empire; a reliable choice for tailored suits or *ao dai*.

Reda (Map p350; ☎ 827 2695; reda@hcm.vnn.vn; 29 Đ Le Thanh Ton; ☎ 10am-7.30pm) An assortment of stylish women's apparel, with handmade tailoring available. There's also an adjoining café, for a bite after browsing.

Sapa (Map p357; vudong@hcm.vnn.vn; ☎ 836 5163; 223 Đ De Tham) Incorporates ethnic fabrics and designs with hip style; also sells gifts and jewellery.

Song (Map p350; ☎ 824 6986; songshops@asiasongdesign.com; 76Đ Đ Le Thanh Ton) A small boutique selling sophisticated, high-end clothing and accessories for both men and women.

Coffee

Vietnamese coffee is prime stuff and is amazingly cheap. The best grades are from Buon Ma Thuot and the beans are roasted in butter. Lovers of weasels and strange things should get their hands on *ca phe chon* ('weasel coffee', No 8 of the signature Trung Nguyen brand). These coffee beans are fed to weasels first, then harvested from their droppings before being sold to you. Brew and enjoy.

The city's major markets, particularly Ben Thanh Market (Map p372), have the best prices and widest selection of both regular and weasel coffee.

Galleries

HCMC is brimming with art galleries. Good places to browse are the handful of galleries around the Fine Arts Museum (p342) and along Đ Dong Khoi. You'll find excellent top-quality works at the following places: **Blue Space Gallery** (Map p336; ☎ 821 3695; 1A Đ Le Thi Hong Gam; ☎ 9am-6pm), **Lacquer & Oil** (Map p336; ☎ 821 2320; 97A Đ Pho Duc Chinh; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) and **Vinh Loi Gallery** (Map p336; ☎ 930 5006; www.galerievinhloi.com; 41 Đ Ba Huyen Thanh Quan, District 3; ☎ 9am-6pm). Any of these places will ship worldwide. For low-quality reproductions of famous paintings, visit the painting shops along Đ Bui Vien (Map p357) in Pham Ngu Lao.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Tan Son Nhat Airport was one of the three busiest in the world in the late 1960s. The runways are still lined with lichen-covered, mortar-proof aircraft-retaining walls, hangars and other military structures.

For more details on international air travel see p477.

Most domestic flights are operated by Vietnam Airlines. Pacific Airlines also flies the

Carved Seals

One item found in every self-respecting bureaucrat's desk is a carved seal. Indeed, no functioning administrator, communist or otherwise, can exist without the official stamps and seals that are the *raison d'être* for legions of clerks. This need is well-catered to by the shops strung out along the street just north of the New World Hotel (opposite side of Đ Ham Nghi and just west of Ben Thanh Market). In Cholon you can find shops making these seals along Đ Hai Thuong Lan Ong.

Most Vietnamese also own carved seals bearing their name (an old tradition borrowed from China). You can have one made, too, but ask a local to help translate your name into Vietnamese. You might want to get your seal carved in Cholon using Chinese characters; these are certainly more artistic (though less practical) than the Romanised script used by the Vietnamese today.

HCMC-Hanoi and HCMC-Danang route, while Sasco flies between HCMC and the Con Dao Islands. See Map p485 for details on routes and schedules.

Boat

Hydrofoils (adult/child US\$10/5, 1¼ hours) depart for Vung Tau (p386) almost hourly from Bach Dang jetty (Map p350) on Đ Ton Duc Thang. For more information contact **Petro Express** (☎ 821 0650) at the jetty.

In Vung Tau you board the hydrofoil at Cau Da pier, opposite the Hai Au Hotel. **Petra Express** (☎ 511 914) has an office in Vung Tau by the pier.

Cargo ferries bound for the Mekong Delta depart from the **dock** (☎ 829 7892) at the river end of ĐL Ham Nghi. Although service is sporadic, travellers with time on their hands can ask about departures to the provinces of An Giang and Vinh Long and to the towns of Ben Tre (eight hours), Ca Mau (30 hours), My Tho

(six hours) and Phu Chau (Tan Chau). Buy your tickets on the boat. Simple food may be available on board. Note these ancient vessels lack the most basic safety gear, such as life jackets.

Bus

Intercity buses depart from and arrive at a variety of stations around HCMC. **Cholon bus station** (Map p346; Đ Le Quang Sung) is the most convenient place to get buses to My Tho and other Mekong Delta towns. It's one street north of the sprawling Binh Tay Market.

Less convenient than Cholon, **Mien Tay bus station** (Ben Xe Mien Tay; ☎ 825 5955) nevertheless has even more buses to areas south of HCMC (basically the Mekong Delta). This huge station is about 10km west of HCMC in An Lac, a part of Binh Chanh district (Huyen Binh Chanh). Buses and minibuses from Mien Tay serve most towns in the Mekong Delta.

Buses to points north of HCMC leave from **Mien Dong bus station** (Ben Xe Mien Dong; ☎ 829 4056),

in Binh Thanh district about 5km from central HCMC on Hwy 13 (Quoc Lo 13), the continuation of Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh. The station is just under 2km north of the intersection of Đ Xo Viet Nghe Tinh and Đ Dien Bien Phu.

There are bus services from Mien Dong to Buon Ma Thuot (12 hours, 110,000d), Danang (26 hours, 200,000d), Haiphong (53 hours, 340,000d), Nha Trang (11 hours, 75,000d), Hanoi (49 hours, 320,000d), Huế (24 hours, 220,000d), Pleiku (22 hours, 190,000d), Vinh (42 hours, 260,000d), Quang Ngai (24 hours, 110,000d), Quy Nhon (17 hours, 90,000d), Nam Dinh (47 hours, 300,000d) and Tuy Hoa (12 hours, 80,000d). Most buses leave daily between 5am and 5.30pm.

Buses to Tay Ninh, Cu Chi and points northeast of HCMC depart from the **Tay Ninh bus station** (Ben Xe Tay Ninh; Map pp334-5; ☎ 849 5935), in Tan Binh district west of the centre. To get there, head all the way out on Đ Cach Mang Thang Tam. The station is about 1km past

where Đ Cach Mang Thang Tam merges with Đ Le Dai Hanh.

INTERNATIONAL BUS

There are also international bus services connecting HCMC and Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The cheapest tickets are sold at the travellers cafés in HCMC's Pham Ngu Lao area, or try **Capitol Guesthouse** (☎ 023-364104) or **Narin Guesthouse** (☎ 023-982554) in Phnom Penh. There are also direct services with **Phnom Penh Sorya Transport** (HCMC 24; 309 Pham Ngu Lao; Phnom Penh ☎ 023-210359; Psar Thmei). Services depart in either direction five times a day between 6.30am and 1pm, costing US\$12. The big advantage with the direct service is that it avoids a change of bus at the border.

Car & Motorbike

Inquire at almost any tourist café, travel agent or your hotel to arrange car rental. Just remember, that your rental will include a driver

MAGNIFICENT MARKETS

Huynh Thuc Khang Street Market

This **street market** (Map p350; Đ Huynh Thuc Khang & Đ Ton That Dam) in the Dong Khoi area sells everything. The area was known as the 'electronics black market' until early 1989, when it was legalised.

You can still buy electronic goods of all sorts – from mosquito zappers to video cassette recorders – but the market has expanded enormously to include clothing, washing detergent, lacquerware, condoms, pirated cassettes, posters of Ho Chi Minh and Britney Spears, smuggled bottles of Johnny Walker, Chinese-made 'Swiss' army knives and just about everything to satisfy your material needs.

Ben Thanh Market

HCMC has a number of huge indoor markets selling all manner of goods. These are some of the best places to pick up conical hats and *ao dai*. The most central of these is **Ben Thanh Market** (Cho Ben Thanh; Map p336; cnr ĐL Le Loi, ĐL Ham Nghi, ĐL Tran Hung Dao & Đ Le Lai). The market and surrounding streets make up one of the city's liveliest areas. Everything that's commonly eaten, worn or used by the Saigonese is available here: vegetables, meats, spices, sweets, tobacco, clothing, household items, hardware and so forth. There's also a healthy selection of souvenir-worthy items.

Known to the French as Les Halles Centrales, it was built in 1914 from reinforced concrete; the central cupola is 28m in diameter. The main entrance, with its belfry and clock, has become a symbol of HCMC. Opposite the belfry, in the centre of the traffic roundabout, is an equestrian statue of Tran Nguyen Hai, the first person in Vietnam to use carrier pigeons. At the base of it, on a pillar, is a small white bust of Quach Thi Trang, a Buddhist woman killed during antigovernment protests in 1963.

Nearby, food stalls sell inexpensive meals. Ben Thanh Market is located 700m southwest of the Rex Hotel.

The Old Market

Despite the name, the **Old Market** (Map p336) is not the place to go to in order to find antiques. Nor is it the place to look for electronics or machinery (you'll need to go to Dan Sinh Market

for these). Rather, the Old Market is where you can most easily buy imported food, wine, shaving cream, shampoo etc. However, if its Vietnamese name, Cho Cu, is written or pronounced without the correct tones it means 'penis'; your *cyclo* driver will no doubt be much amused if you say that this is what you're looking for. Perhaps directions would be a better bet – the Old Market can be found on the north side of ĐL Ham Nghi between Đ Ton That Dam and Đ Ho Tung Mau.

Dan Sinh Market

Also known as the War Surplus Market, **Dan Sinh Market** (Map p336; 104 Đ Yersin) is the place to shop for a chic pair of combat boots or rusty dog tags. It's also the best market for electronics and other types of imported machinery.

Dan Sinh is next to Phung Son Tu Pagoda. The front part is filled with stalls selling automobiles and motorbikes, but directly behind the pagoda building you can find reproductions of what seems to be secondhand military gear.

Stall after stall sells everything from handy gas masks and field stretchers to rain gear and mosquito nets. You can also find canteens, duffel bags, ponchos and boots. Anyone planning on spending time in Rwanda or New York City should consider picking up a secondhand flak jacket (prices are good).

Binh Tay Market

Cholon's main market is **Binh Tay Market** (Map p346; ĐL Hau Giang), a Chinese-style architectural masterpiece with a great clock tower in the centre. Much of the business here is wholesale.

An Dong Market

Cholon's other indoor market, **An Dong** (Map pp334-5), is very close to the intersection of ĐL Tran Phu and ĐL An Duong Vuong. This market is four storeys high and is crammed with shops. The 1st floor carries nothing but clothing, including imported designer jeans from Hong Kong, the latest pumps from Paris and *ao dai* (Vietnamese national dress). The basement is a gourmet's delight of small restaurants – a perfect place to lunch on the cheap.

as it's illegal for foreigners to drive in Vietnam without a Vietnamese license. The agencies in the Pham Ngu Lao area generally offer the lowest prices. Motorbikes are available (also in Pham Ngu Lao) for around US\$10 per day.

Train

Trains from **Saigon train station** (Ga Sai Gon; Map pp334-5; ☎ 823 0105; 1 Đ Nguyen Thong, District 3; ticket office ☎ 7.15-11am & 1-3pm) serve cities along the coast north of HCMC.

Train tickets can be purchased from **Saigon Railways Tourist Services** (Map p357; ☎ 836 7640; fax 837 5224; 275C Đ Pham Ngu Lao; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1-4.30pm) or from most travel agents.

For details on the *Reunification Express* service see p491.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Tan Son Nhat Airport is 7km northwest of central HCMC. Metered taxis are your best bet between the airport and the city centre, and cost around 75,000d. You'll be enthusiastically greeted by a group of taxi drivers after you exit the terminal; most are OK, but make sure that the driver agrees to use the meter and it is switched on *after* you get in the car. The airport also has an outfit that provides a reliable taxi into the city. **Sasco Taxi** (☎ 844 6448), just past the baggage carousels, has a counter where you can pre-pay (100,000d) for a taxi.

Be aware that taxi drivers will probably recommend a 'good and cheap' hotel, and deliver you to a hotel for a commission; if you don't know where you're going, this is not a bad system per se. Problems may arise, however, when you ask a taxi driver to take you to a place that doesn't pay commission. The driver may tell you the hotel is closed, burned down, is dirty and dangerous, or anything to steer you somewhere else.

If you're travelling solo and without much baggage, a motorbike taxi is an option for getting to/from the airport. Drivers hang out near the airport car park and typically ask around 50,000d to go to the city centre. If you take a motorbike taxi to Tan Son Nhat, you may have to walk the short distance from the airport gate to the terminal.

To get to the airport you can call a taxi (see p376). Some cafés in the Pham Ngu Lao area do runs to the airport – these places even have sign-up sheets where you can book share-taxis for US\$2 per person.

Most economical is the air-conditioned airport bus 152 (1000d), going to and from the airport. Buses leave the airport approximately every 15 minutes, stopping briefly at both the international and domestic terminals before heading downtown. They then make regular stops along Đ De Tham (Pham Ngu Lao area) and international hotels along Đ Dong Khoi, such as the Caravelle and the Majestic. Buses are labelled in English, but you might also look for the words 'Xe Buyt San Bay'.

Bicycle

For brave, pedal-loving souls, a bicycle can be a great, if slow, way to get around the city. Bikes can be rented from a number of places – many hotels, cafés and travel agencies can help you.

A good place to buy a decent (ie imported) bicycle is at the shops near the New World Hotel on Đ Le Thanh Ton (Map p357), a short walk from the Pham Ngu Lao area.

Bicycle parking lots are usually just roped-off sections of pavement. For about 2000d you can safely leave your bicycle (theft is a big problem). Your bicycle will have a number written on the seat in chalk or stapled to the handlebars and you'll be given a reclaim chit – don't lose it! If you come back and your bicycle is gone, the parking lot is supposedly required to replace it.

Boat

It's easy to hire a motorised 5m-long boat to tour the Saigon River. There's always someone hanging around looking to charter a boat. Ask them to bring it to you (they can easily do this), rather than you going to the boat.

The price should be around US\$6 per hour for a small boat or US\$10 to US\$20 for a larger, faster craft. Interesting destinations for short trips include Cholon (along Ben Nghe Channel) and the zoo (along Thi Nghe Channel). Note that both channels are fascinating, but filthy – raw sewage is discharged into the water. Tourists regard the channels as a major attraction, but the government considers them an eyesore and has attempted to move residents out. The channels will eventually be filled in and the water diverted into underground sewerage pipes.

For longer trips up the Saigon River, it is worth chartering a fast speedboat from Saigon Tourist. Although these cost at least US\$20 per hour, you'll save money, as a cheap boat takes

at least five times longer for the same journey. Although cruising the Saigon River can be interesting, it pales in comparison with the splendour of the canals in the Mekong Delta.

Since you hire boats by the hour, some will go slowly because they know the meter is running. You might want to set a time limit at the start.

Ferries across the Saigon River leave from the dock at the foot of ĐL Ham Nghi and run every half-hour or so between 4.30am and 10.30pm.

Bus

Few tourists make use of the city buses; they are safer than *cyclos*, though less aesthetic. Now that HCMC's People's Committee has resolved to phase out *cyclos*, some money is finally being put into the badly neglected public-transport system.

At present, there are only a few bus routes, though more undoubtedly will be added. No decent bus map is available and bus stops are mostly unmarked, so it's worth summarising the main bus lines.

Saigon-Cholon buses depart from Me Linh Sq (by the Saigon River) and continue along ĐL Tran Hung Dao to Binh Tay Market in Cholon, then return along the same route. The buses running this route have air-con and video movies and the driver is well dressed! All this for 3000d. Buy your ticket on board from the attendant.

Mien Dong–Mien Tay buses (5000d) depart from Mien Dong bus station (northeast HCMC), pass through Cholon and terminate at Mien Tay bus station on the western edge of town.

Car & Motorbike

Travel agencies, hotels and cafés are all in the car-rental business. Most vehicles are relatively recent Japanese- or Korean-made machines – everything from subcompacts to minibuses. Not long ago, classic American cars (complete with tail-fins and impressive chrome fenders) were popular as 'wedding taxis'. Prestige these days, however, means a white Toyota. Nevertheless, some of the old vehicles can be hired for excursions in and around HCMC. You'll also see the occasional French-built Renault or Citroën. The former Soviet Union chaps in with Ladas, Moskviches and Volgas.

If you're brave you can rent a motorbike and really earn your 'I Survived Saigon'

T-shirt. Many say this is the fastest and easiest way to get around the city – and to the hospital, if you don't know what you're doing. Even if you're an experienced biker, make sure you've spent some time observing traffic patterns before putting yourself in it.

Motorbike rentals are ubiquitous in places where tourists tend to congregate – the Pham Ngu Lao area is as good as any. Ask at the cafés. A 100cc motorbike can be rented for US\$6 to US\$10 per day and your passport may be kept as collateral. Before renting one make sure it's rideable, and if you're wise you'll also rent a helmet (about US\$1 per day).

Saigon Scooter Centre (☎ 848 7816; www.saigon-scootercentre.com; 25/7 Đ Cuu Long, Tan Binh district; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is a reliable source for restored classic Vespa and Lambretta scooters, which are also rented out (as well as a range of other well-maintained bikes). Daily rental rates start from US\$10 and discounts are offered for longer rentals. For an extra fee it'll provide a one-way service, with a pick-up of the bikes anywhere in Vietnam.

Cyclo

No longer the icon that it once was, the *cyclo* still makes its appearance along certain streets, particularly along Đ Pham Ngu Lao and around Đ Dong Khoi. Although some Vietnamese still enjoy them, use has declined significantly in the day of the motorbike, and tourists are largely the beneficiaries of this poorly paid trade. In HCMC, many of the drivers are former South Vietnamese army soldiers and quite a few know at least basic English, while others are quite fluent. Some drivers have stories of war, 're-education', persecution and poverty to tell (and will often gladly regale you with tales over a bowl of *pho* or a beer at the end of the day).

In an effort to control HCMC's traffic problems, there are dozens of streets on which *cyclos* are prohibited. As a result, your driver must often take a circuitous route to avoid these trouble spots (and possible fines levied by the police) and may not be able to drop you at the exact address. Try to have some sympathy as it is not the driver's fault.

Short hops around the city centre should cost around 8000d to 12,000d; District 1 to central Cholon costs about 20,000d. Overcharging tourists is the norm, so negotiate a price beforehand and have the exact change ready. You can rent a *cyclo* for around 20,000d

per hour, a fine idea if you will be doing a lot of touring; most *cyclo* drivers around the Pham Ngu Lao area can produce a sample tour programme.

You should enjoy *cyclos* while you can, as the municipal government plans to phase them out, and it won't be too long before the *cyclo* disappears entirely from the city's streets.

Motorbike Taxi

Far more prevalent and much faster than a traditional taxi is the *xe om* (sometimes called a *Honda om*), or motorbike taxi. *Xe om* drivers usually hang out on their parked bikes on street corners, looking for passengers, and will usually wave you down first. When looking for one, it's highly unlikely that you'll have to walk more than 10 steps before being offered a ride. The accepted rate is 10,000d to 15,000d for short rides (Pham Ngu Lao to Dong Khoi

area for instance) or you can hire one for around US\$2 per hour.

Taxi

Metered taxis cruise the streets, but it's often easier to phone for one. Several companies in HCMC offer metered taxis and charge almost exactly the same rates. The flagfall is around 12,000d to 15,000d for the first kilometre. Most rides in the city centre cost less than 30,000d. Note that faulty meters are much less common here than in Hanoi.

The following contact details are for HCMC's main taxi companies.

Ben Thanh Taxi (☎ 842 2422)

Mai Linh Taxi (☎ 822 6666)

Red Taxi (☎ 844 6677)

Saigon Taxi (☎ 842 4242)

Vina Taxi (☎ 811 1111)

Vinasum Taxi (☎ 827 7178)