

Travel Black Book Singaporeans Living Abroad

Hop about from Hanoi

The Vietnamese capital is a great base to make trips to scenic locations such as Halong Bay and Sapa



Who: Grace Gan, 27, is the operations manager at serviced apartments Somerset West Point Hanoi. She moved to Hanoi in February last year.



Halong Bay, a Unesco World Heritage Site and a four-hour drive from Hanoi, features thousands of limestone karsts and isles in various shapes and sizes. PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRACE GAN

Ankita Varma

Destination: Hanoi, Vietnam's capital, features an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western culture in its architecture and cuisine.

You find cafes with store-front seats facing the street like you would in France, alongside local eateries with diners having their meals perched on humble plastic stools.

Hanoi also serves as a great base for side trips around the country, which does not have many international airports.

SEE It is worth visiting the Ho Chi Minh museum (<http://www.baotanghochiminh.vn/>) to find out about the life of the Vietnamese communist revolutionary leader that the museum is named after and how he united Vietnam. Engage a guide from a free walking tour as many of them are eager to share stories about Ho Chi Minh.

One of my favourite neighbourhoods is Tay Ho, a district around West Lake, the biggest lake in Hanoi. It is quieter than the city centre and there is a wide variety of dining outlets around the lake.

When the weather is not too hot, it is a great place to cycle. One round is about 14km and will take 1½ hours to complete at a leisurely pace.

Many parts of Hanoi are still not built up with skyscrapers, so it is easy to get a pleasant view from many locations. If you want a vantage point that overlooks the whole of Hanoi, go to the Lotte Observation Deck (<https://bit.ly/2K7U8Kz>) on the 65th floor of Lotte Tower.

My favourite way to spend an afternoon is at Maison Marou (www.maisonmarou.com), a gourmet cafe, patisserie and chocolate factory that makes all its chocolate using cacao beans grown in different parts of Vietnam. You can watch them make the chocolate and pastries through a glass panel.

EAT

Similar to hawker centres in Singapore, good Vietnamese food can be found at street stalls which usually specialise in one or a few dishes.

For a typical Vietnamese breakfast, try beef pho, sticky rice or rice flour rolls called banh cuon, filled with ground pork, wood ear mushroom and shallots. A good place for beef pho is Bat Dan Pho (45 Bat Dan) or Pho Thin (13 Lo Duc). Bat Dan Pho prepares beef pho slightly differently by stir-frying the beef with garlic before serving it in the soup.

Another must-try dish is bun cha, or grilled pork served with rice noodles and fresh vegetables, which costs around 45,000 dong (\$52.70) a serving.

Also try cha cha, or fish marinated

in turmeric, pan-fried with dill and eaten with rice noodles and fish sauce. You can get it at Cha Ca Thang Long (www.chacathanglong.com). At 200,000 dong a person, it is one of the pricier local dishes.

Hanoi is famous for its egg coffee, ca phe trung, which has a creamy, meringue-like egg white foam with Vietnamese coffee underneath. You can get it at Cafe Dinh (13 Dinh Tien Hoang), a hidden cafe on the second floor of a shophouse around Hoan Kiem Lake.

Also try Vietnamese desserts such as rau cau dua xiem (coconut pudding) and creme caramel (or caramen, as spelt by the locals) at 29 Hang Than.

Alcohol is cheap in Hanoi. When you walk around, you will see many

signs with the words "bia hoi". These are Vietnamese beer gardens, though the words roughly translate to fresh beer. The beer is brewed daily and does not have preservatives. It is very light and refreshing and costs only around 10,000 dong a pint.

PLAY

The Lunar New Year or Tet Nguyen Dan is the most important celebration of the year.

Come to Hanoi one or two weeks before Tet and you will see the city covered in red decorations and bustling with activity. However, avoid coming on the first three days of Tet as it will be a ghost town. Many shops will be closed as people gather for their family reunions.

For side trips, the most popular destination is Halong Bay, which is a Unesco World Heritage Site and a four-hour drive from Hanoi. The bay features thousands of limestone karsts and isles in various shapes and sizes. Enjoy a serene one- or two-night cruise on the bay with activities such as kayaking and visits to fishing villages and caves.

Another day trip is to Ninh Binh, located about two hours south of Hanoi. Take a boat ride to Trang An Grottoes, another Unesco World Heritage Site.

Also check out Bai Dinh Pagoda, the biggest pagoda in Vietnam. It has 500 La Han statues and the biggest bronze Buddha statue in the country, at 10m tall and weighing 100 tonnes.

Around six hours north of Hanoi is Sapa, a small mountain town. You can do a home stay at one of the many surrounding villages, where the locals prepare meals for you and take you trekking around the paddy fields, forests and mountainous landscape.

If you are up to the challenge, you can also trek up Fansipan, the highest mountain in Vietnam.

For a more relaxing activity, there is the World Fansipan Legend Cable Car (<https://bit.ly/2K6oEch>), which overlooks the terraced rice fields of the Muong Hoa Valley.

The best month to view the rice fields is September, when the rice is ready to be harvested and the fields are still green with patches of gold.

The weather is also relatively stable with a comfortable temperature of around 17 deg C.

SHOP

Dong Xuan Market is the largest covered market in Hanoi, where you can find all sorts of things from clothes to household goods to foodstuffs. Fruit chips, nuts, dried mushrooms, dried scallops and tea leaves make great souvenirs.

If you love flowers, there is Quang Ba Flower Market, a night market with peak hours between 2 and 6am. The stalls start to open around midnight.

Depending on the season, you can find lotus, sunflowers, orchids, lilies, hydrangeas and other flowers at significantly cheaper prices than in Singapore.

Every weekend, the street around Hoan Kiem Lake is closed to traffic and there is a night market in the adjoining Hang Dao Street, which opens from around 7pm to midnight.

A popular souvenir is the Vietnamese coffee drop filter which can be found almost everywhere.

Hanoi is also famous for its lacquer products. You can find premium lacquer products at Hanoi House (hanoihouse.com/) in the Old Quarter.

If you have time, you can tailor-make an ao dai, the Vietnamese traditional costume, at 192 Kim Ma Street. The dress' history goes back to the 18th century and its design has evolved to become the one we see today – a fitting tunic worn over trousers.

STAY

Somerset West Point Hanoi (<https://bit.ly/2K7mu2z>), where I work, is located between Noi Bai Airport and the Old Quarter. It is also near West Lake and Quang Ba Flower Market.

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GETTING THERE

There are multiple daily direct flights between Hanoi and Singapore, including on Singapore Airlines, Vietjet Air and Vietnam Air. The flight time is three hours and 20 minutes.

TIPS

- If you like cool weather, the best time to visit is in winter between November and February. Many people are surprised to find that Hanoi has four seasons. Remember to check the weather forecast before coming as it can get quite chilly.
- The traffic can seem chaotic, but somehow there are not many accidents. Just stay calm and walk slowly at an even pace when crossing the road.
- The exchange rate in Hanoi is usually better than in Singapore. You can find many money changers in Ha Trung Street.
- For transport, Grab is the cheapest and most reliable option. If you must take a taxi, only Taxi Group or Mai Linh taxis are reliable, but they are more expensive than Grab. The other taxis may not use a meter or may drive around in circles.



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