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# ‘England’, ‘Miss Moonlight’ and the lady-men of Hanoi

By **Matt Jones**

I met the boy with the rhyming name near the lotus pond at One Pillar Pagoda. He wore a floppy, fraying straw hat and had an old leather satchel slung over his shoulder. In one hand he held a battered copy of *What They Don’t Teach You At Harvard Business School*.

As I was turning to leave for downtown Hanoi he flicked away his cigarette and sidled up to me. “Excuse me sir,” he said. “Do you ever walk on Hampstead Heath?”

Pham Tuan Anh, 17, is a typical Vietnamese youth, too young to remember the bombing raids in the last desperate years of “The American War.” Intelligent, inquisitive, forthright and witty, Anh – he tells me his name means ‘England’ – is keen to learn English. When he is not studying economics at Hanoi’s Foreign Trade College he hangs around the capital’s most popular tourist attractions, hoping to speak with Westerners. “I could tell by your clothes where you come from,” he boasts.

In return for posting a letter to his friend in Hampstead, north London, Anh agrees to show me his city.

On a cloudy day with the wind whipping in from Siberia and the people dressed in drab, heavy clothes, Hanoi is a bleak place. On a fine day, however, it is striking to look at and a joy to explore. The product of a shotgun marriage between Asia and Europe, the city centre combines Confucian conservatism with an unkempt Gallic charm. Unaffected by bombing, it resembles a large, leafy suburb and has changed little since French times.

The 19th century colonialists turned Hanoi into a French provincial town and, like arrogant white gods, sought to remold its people in their own image. They brought their idea of “civilisation” to the natives, and even today the café culture of France has a stronger hold over the Vietnamese than the burger bar culture of the United States. The films *L’Amant* and *Indochine* are more popular than *Platoon* and *Born On The Fourth Of July*.

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No doubt the French-built opera house, museum and charcoal-grey cathedral will remain in years to come, but the smaller colonial buildings may well disappear as Vietnam hauls itself into the 21st century. With them will go much of Hanoi's unique charm. The Vietnamese want foreign capital and if the introduction of big business means the end of the city's small town ambience, so be it. The message for travellers is, "If you are going to go, go now," before Hanoi becomes a clone of Tokyo or Singapore.

Today, the city is a frontier. Diplomats and businessmen are boldly going where few have gone before. Every foreign visitor you meet seems to be in Hanoi for a purpose, helping to construct a more modern, efficient and open Vietnam. Once again, outsiders are bringing their version of civilisation to the Vietnamese, but this time they are invited.

It is likely that many will have arrived on the same flight as you. I was to meet Captain Richard Cooper and his group of quiet, courteous American war veterans on several occasions; I saw the German engineer more times than I can recall; and the Australian tour operators kept turning up like bad pennies ("We drove from Hue. It was like 17 hours in a washing machine," said one).

Anh and I rent bicycles and begin our tour in the Old Quarter. Known to the French as Cite Indigene, the district is made up of narrow streets that are named after the businesses that once occupied them. On Hang Bong (Cotton Street), a blackened youth delivers bricks of damp coal from the seat of his battered *cyclo*, while on Hang Bac (Silver Street), a woman picks lice from the head of a child. The smell of cooked dog meat hangs in the air.

In cuisine, attitude and dress, the inhabitants of the Old Quarter identify more with China than with France, even when their blue-shuttered homes resemble run-down hotels in pre-war Bordeaux.

One of the most modern buildings in Hanoi is the lotus-shaped Ho Chi Minh Museum in the northwest of the city. Walking through its dark interior is like journeying through an extremely cluttered mind. The museum is not so much a showcase of the leader's life and work as of the whole era in which he lived. A guide named Nguyet Anh ("Call me Miss Moonlight") shows Anh and me around the surreal collection of Charlie Chaplin, Louis Armstrong and war dead pictures, the plastic American car, the giant pineapple, the stopped clock and the large empty red tent.

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In one section, Buddhas, bombs, a broken crucifix and a French guillotine are displayed on a rocky shoreline: The flotsam and jetsam of Vietnam's turbulent voyage through the 20th century.

The variety, nature and number of exhibits, together with their overpowering symbolism, give rise to a delirious confusion that Anh and I remedy by cycling along the wide avenue, past Ho's Mausoleum, to the grand Presidential Palace.

As my young guide chats with the two sentries, it strikes me that Vietnamese sounds like a pleasant love song played backwards. One guard wears a non-regulation red shirt. The other, Thu, has a smart uniform but sports pink nail varnish on each of his little fingers. "They may be lady-men," whispers Anh. "Hanoi is changing. Now we have them, too."

Here, Anh and I go our separate ways – he to an evening class and I to a drink at the Metropole Hotel, where Graham Greene wrote part of his 1955 novel *The Quiet American*. As I cycle away down the elegant, leafy boulevards of this enchanting city a sad thought crosses my mind: Dressed as he is, in his floppy hat and sandals, my charming, clever host would never get through the door.

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