

Viet-Namaste

VIETNAM
IS AN UNSPOILED
PARADISE, PERFECT
FOR FOODIES AND
SHOPPERS. IT SHOULD
BE ON THE TOP OF YOUR
LIST IF YOU PLAN TO VISIT
ASIA. OUR OWN DANNY SEO
TREKS HALFWAY AROUND
THE WORLD TO EXPLORE THE
EXOTIC PARTS UNKNOWN.

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NATURALLY, DANNY • SUMMER 2019





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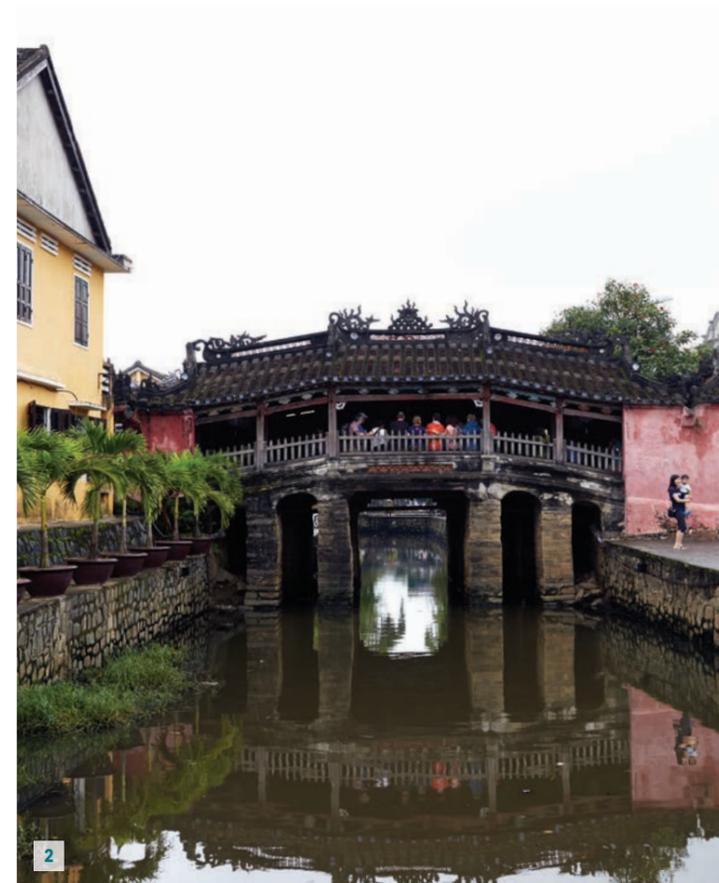
BEEN TO ASIA MANY TIMES IN my life, and there are a few things I know for sure: It's very expensive, it's very crowded, and it's very likely you'll run into plenty of Americans on your journey to the Far East. If this all sounds unappealing, may I suggest this: Buy a round-trip ticket to Vietnam.

Yes, it's a hassle to get there. The journey requires a 16-hour Cathay Pacific flight from Los Angeles that connects via Hong Kong to Da Nang. But just like a decadent dessert that's worth the calories, this destination is worth the time it takes to get there. It truly is a bucket-list worthy adventure.

While it's tempting to be cosmopolitan and stay in the capitol of Hanoi, skip that and head to Hoi An. This is a gorgeous, beautifully preserved ancient town, with a mix of old French Colonial buildings, ornate Vietnamese houses and covered bridges. There are shops, street merchants, and restaurants up every street and down every alley. There's not a Starbucks or McDonald's in sight (thank heavens). This is a glorious town you'll love to wander through, explore in detail, and visit without a set agenda.

And in the heart of Hoi An is the Anantara Hoi An Resort, which smartly marries rich Colonial architecture with modern amenities and top-notch service. Sure, you can grab a free bike and ride through town, but you'll also be fine heading out on foot.

1. **The shimmering pool at the Anantara Hoi An Resort.**
2. **Centuries-old bridges dot the city of Hoi An.**
3. **Sellers carry fruit for sale through the streets. Be sure to get fresh lychees!**



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Glowing lanterns illuminate the streets of Hoi An at night.



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Just turn left from the hotel entrance and explore on your own. The day I arrived, I wandered and picked up a Tom Ford-worthy, gorgeous silk robe at a fair-trade shop for \$25. I sampled fresh mango, jackfruit, lychees, and dragon fruit for less than \$1. And I had an indulgent, jet-lag-fighting foot massage—a warm bath filled with fresh cut ginger, lemon grass, and citrus peels—for just \$10. Did I mention the dollar here is incredibly strong?

If you're here for the shopping, take note: Bespoke tailoring is a must-do the minute you arrive. Just bring your best-fitting shirt, dress, or pants from home and pick your favorite fabrics from a wall of sumptuous linens, silks, and woven cottons. They'll use your clothing as a template and make for you perfectly tailored pieces for pennies on the dollar. The day you check out, you'll have a new wardrobe to bring home.

Also, seek out handwoven sterling silver baskets (\$25; perfect to stash jewelry and corral cash and cards on your bedside table), chunky wooden necklaces (\$3; I drape them on my coffee table) and bags of Vietnamese roasted whole bean coffee (\$6) to bring home. And I found a little handmade treasure—a hand-carved bearded bust upcycled from a bamboo root. Yes, look closely and you'll see that the root is the beard!

At the Anantara Hoi An Resort, if you do just one

4. Fresh passionfruit, pomelo, dragon fruit and lychees brighten up any Vietnamese breakfast.
5. Motorcycles rule the roads and this messenger is at full capacity!
6. A hand-carved statue made from discarded bamboo root.



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- 7. A suite at the Anantara Quy Nhon Villas; wake up and refresh in your own infinity pool.
- 8. Mr. Phuc teaches you martial arts right on the beach. Sure beats spin class!
- 9. A photo op captured at a Buddhist temple that's open to the public.
- 10. The freshest crabs cooked to perfection for lunch.



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thing make it a boat ride. The property can arrange for a private sunset boat cruise that takes you up and down the Thu Bon River. There's nothing more refreshing than noshing on Vietnamese appetizers, sipping an ice-cold beer, and feeling the cool breeze against your skin. Arrange this so you depart a few hours before dinner. When you return, you can head straight to dinner at the hotel or at a nearby restaurant in town. That leaves you plenty of time to slumber off and beat jet lag for good.

After a few days in Hoi An, it's time to say goodbye to the ancient town and go somewhere truly remote—the city of Quy Nhon.

It's a seven-hour drive from the hotel to Quy Nhon, but it's worth it.

You drive through small villages dotted with rice paddies. There isn't any traffic. The majority of Vietnamese people use motorcycles as a means of transportation, which means cars are few and far between. If you're driving with friends, try this: Pack a cooler with a variety of *banh mi* sandwiches from different vendors (the good folks at the Anantara Hoi An Hotel can help!) and try them all. Gazing out the window is actually a delightful experience on this drive.

Where to stay? There's only one answer—the Anantara Quy Nhon Villas.

The next morning, I'm up at 5:30 and draw back the curtains. There are just 26 villas on the property that overlook the Bay of Quy Nhon. The bay is surrounded by mountains, so you have this

sense of calm and cozy comfort here. It's an Instagram-worthy setting. Bobbing up and down in the bay, wooden fishing boats harvest lobster during the day and calamari at night. As the sun sets, the lanterns glow in the water for an even more breathtaking view.

Let's talk about the room, shall we? Now, there are mini bars in many hotel rooms and then, at this resort, they have what I shall call a major bar. It's a refrigerator/freezer that is stocked beyond belief: charcuteries, every beverage you can imagine, full-size bottles of wine, and even ice cream. A note: Grab the cashew nuts. They're packaged in the most adorable container that feature a woven conical "hat" cap.

Soak in your giant in-room tub,



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plunge in the private pool, nap on the fluffy bed, and skip work (even though each room has Wi-Fi). If you want to be healthy, take a run on the beach or sign up for a beachside class with Mr. Phuc, a master of Vovinam martial arts. The resort even provides you with the wardrobe for class! *Hi-ya!* And for spa lovers, this resort may have one of the most beautiful zen dens I've ever set foot in. There are massages and then there are sleep-inducing massages that stay with you hours later.

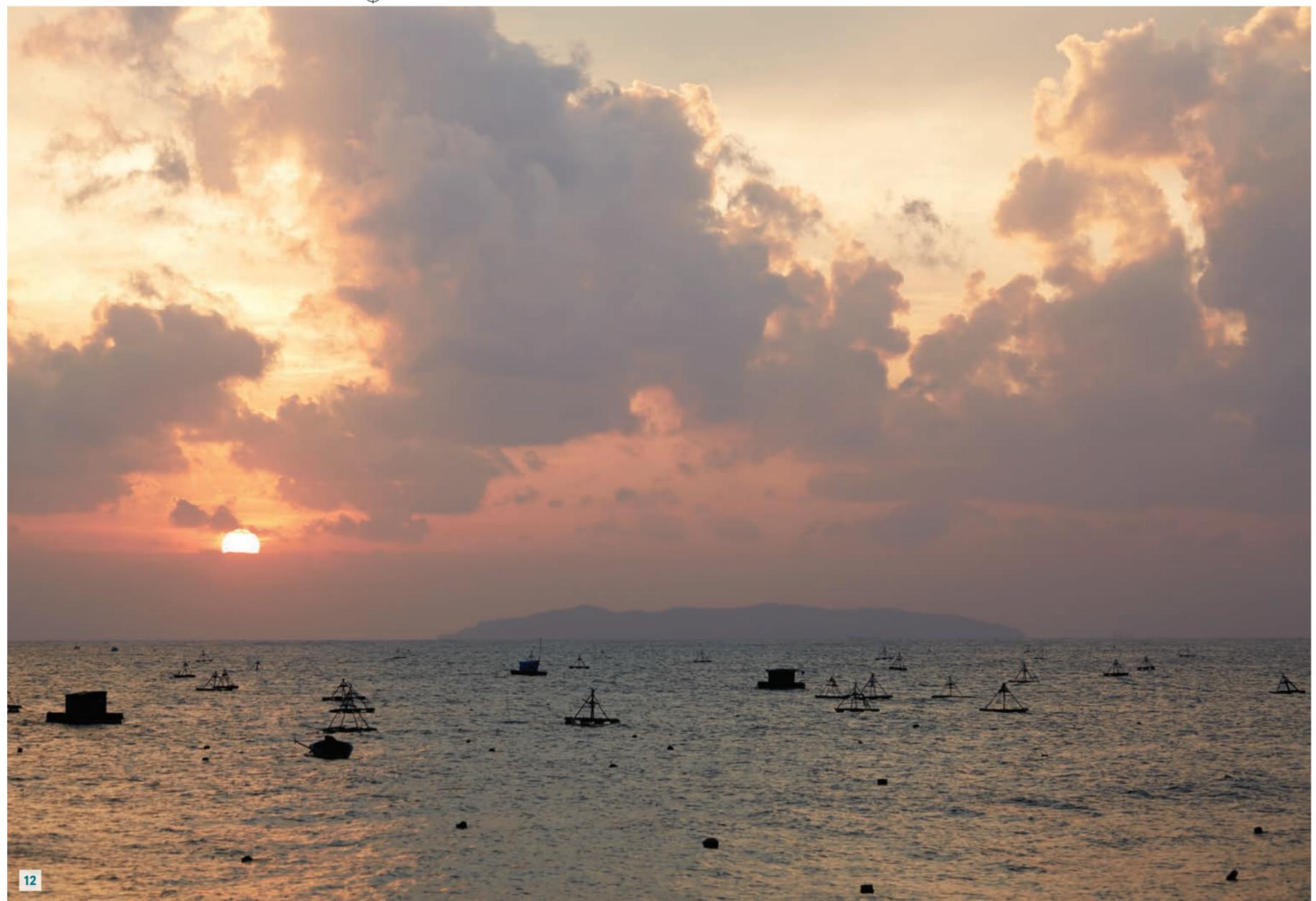
But Quy Nhon city isn't about isolating yourself at a five-star resort: Hire a local guide and go into town.

Start off with a Vietnamese coffee for a true burst of energy. It's a mix of very strong espresso, condensed milk, sugar, more espresso, and more sugar—all served over ice. I can tolerate caffeine pretty well and this drink gave me a jittery jolt. And you'll need it: In town are Buddhist temples with stunningly manicured gardens you can meander around and old temples high up in the

mountains that will have you reaching your 10,000 step goal in no time flat.

For lunch, skip the rush hour (around noon) and go where the locals eat at 1 p.m. so you can linger, ask questions, and try a variety of dishes. Trust me, you do not want to be in the way of locals who are trying to dine quickly. My favorite meal consisted of warm crepes that you fill with fresh seafood, veggies, and herbs, all dipped in a sweet and sour sauce and washed down with a cold beer. It was a delicious way to end our visit into the city.

If you want to venture farther, try a multi-course seafood experience. It doesn't get fresher; these restaurants are simply built over water with nothing more than small tables and an open-air kitchen without refrigeration. Everything is caught fresh, prepared fresh, and tastes fresh. Spicy lobster, snails, fish, and shrimp all delightfully prepared with garlicky sauce, spicy chilies, ginger, and lemongrass. For about \$30, you get a \$300 Michelin-star worthy



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meal that you'll remember forever.

For a final out-of-body experience, try the Anantara "Dining by Design" experience at this resort. You'll wander through a candlelit maze until you find the most over-the-top dining table, set up right on the beach. Under a starlit sky, fresh dishes are prepared on site and hours of good food with good friends will equal great memories of your trip to Vietnam.

- 11. Danny lounging inside his villa with a good book.
- 12. Fishing boats bob up and down in the bay outside the resort.

Good To Know

- **You can learn** more about the two Anantara properties (and other resorts they have all over the world) by visiting anantara.com.
- **You will need** a travel visa to visit Vietnam. It can be done online at vietnamembassy-usa.org. It's quick and easy.
- **Cash is king** in Vietnam. Street merchants will accept both local currency and U.S. dollars. Larger stores accept Visa or Mastercard, but American Express is not widely accepted. The app

GlobeConvert is handy to have on your phone to figure out exchange rates. • **May to October** is the hottest and most humid time of the year. A good time to visit is November to April, when it's cool and dry. • **Most international flights** connect through Hong Kong, which is one of the best airports to do some last-minute shopping. Look for jade facial rollers, which can be found for just a few bucks (instead of \$90 at Sephora). The duty-free shop has local infused

gins that come in pretty bottles and are pretty tasty, too. And if you're lucky enough to get into the Cathay Pacific lounge, head to the noodle bar to get a freshly prepared meal before your long flight home. • **Locals are very aware** of Instagram-worthy photo moments. If you see a performer or street vendor that is too irresistible not to shoot, ask first. They know you want a photo and a small tip or a purchase is expected for that privilege.