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VIETNAM'S
NORTH
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Hanoi, Halong Bay & Sapa

EXPLORING HEFEI | MEET THE QUEEN OF UBUD | CHANGI'S VEGGIE DELIGHTS

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF SINGAPORE SUN FESTIVAL

northstars

As Hanoi marks its 1,000th birthday, we salute this fast-moving city's creative flair before venturing out to enjoy northern Vietnam's slower pace of life

WORDS: ROD MACKENZIE



Hanoi makes a convenient gateway to many of northern Vietnam's other fabulous attractions



Bay of Plenty

For a complete change of pace from Hanoi, our writer samples a one-night cruise on Halong Bay. Operators such as Bhaya Cruises (www.bhayacruises.com) offer a pick-up and drop-off service direct from the city centre.

With some 1,600 tooth-shaped limestone islands and islets jutting sharply from a calm, turquoise sea, Halong Bay makes for one of the most enthralling cruise locations on the planet. While it is just three hours' drive from Hanoi, the scenery is from another era entirely, like an ancient woodcut drawing brought to life by Hollywood's latest 3D magic.

Bhaya Cruises welcomed me aboard a delightful wooden sailing junk with only 20 en-suite cabins. Its airy dining area and bar feels like a classy wood-panelled drawing room, and if, like me, you've never fancied a cruise holiday before, the luxurious *Bhaya Classic* makes you leave such preconceptions back on dry land.

Cabaret shows, cinemas and casinos aren't required – when it comes to entertainment, it's Halong Bay's culture and natural surroundings

that get top billing. Days are spent paddling kayaks or swimming into limestone grottoes, squid fishing by lamplight off the stern, visiting floating villages, sunbathing on deck and tucking into delicious seafood buffets. And all the while an ethereal landscape of quite breathtaking beauty is slowly drifting past.

Stepping ashore at Halong City next morning I felt as if I'd been away for seven nights, not one. Even so, I wished it had been longer – and I never imagined I'd ever say that about a cruise.



Above: Getting up close to Halong Bay's scenery. Below: Bhaya Cruises can arrange private dinners on a beach

PHOTOS: GETTYIMAGES; CORBIS; ROD MACKENZIE

High Society

Our writer completes his tour of the best of northern Vietnam by taking a train to Sapa, staying at the Victoria Sapa Resort (www.victoriahotels-asia.com).

Located 380km north of Hanoi, Sapa is a picturesque mountain retreat nestled among some spectacular scenery. Taking an overnight train for the lengthy ascent, I travelled in supreme style aboard the *Victoria Express*. Featuring a swish velvet and mahogany-panelled restaurant car (pictured right) and two air-conditioned sleeping carriages, it drops off its pampered, bleary-eyed passengers at the crack of dawn in Lao Cai, just a stone's throw from the border with China. From here, it's a 45-minute switchback minibus ride to Sapa that soon had me wide awake, gripping my seat tensely as we raced into the clouds, vertiginous slopes plunging on all sides to reveal endless terraced rice fields.

Overlooking the centre of Sapa, the Victoria Sapa Resort and Spa projects a cosy, alpine theme with polished wood floors, antique-filled rooms and roaring log fires. And like any luxury chalet worth its name, it also offers a heated indoor pool and stylish spa to complete the sense of blissful escapism.

Formerly a French colonial hill station, Sapa has recently developed into a popular tourist destination lined with cafes, restaurants and bars. The draw here isn't simply the dramatic mountain scenery, but the chance to encounter



local minority groups, such as the Black Hmong and Red Dao hill tribes. While many of these hardy hill dwellers gather in Sapa on market days, a better way to appreciate their culture and the landscape is to strike out on foot into the countryside accompanied by a trekking guide.

With limited time, I picked one of the shorter half-day trails to the nearby village of Cat Cat and was rewarded by a brief yet memorable glimpse of Black Hmong village life. Following a steep, narrow path to the valley floor passing simple bamboo-built farmsteads and rice terraces dotted with water buffalo, I stopped to breathe in large gulps of bracing, ozone-rich air beside a crashing waterfall. My guide smiled and pointed up at another path snaking towards the neighbouring village; children were waving their arms enthusiastically, beckoning me to continue. But it would have to wait for another visit; I had my train to catch back to Hanoi. ☑

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly Singapore Airlines, Vietnam Airlines or Tiger Airways from Changi Airport