

After Hours



Made to measure

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Eat, drink and shop your

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FACTFILE

Visas and vaccinations: Australian passport holders need to arrange a tourist visa in advance, available by post or in person from the Vietnamese Embassy. Visit www.vietnambassy.gov.au for information and

Made to Measure

YOU buy more? You buy more?" Variations of this refrain are as familiar to travellers as strange dreams on a sleeper train in many parts of the world, but for once I'm not feigning deafness or trying to slip away into the crowd.

I'm in a made-to-measure tailor's shop in Hoi An on Vietnam's central coast, and I'm seriously tempted by the fabrics and styles on offer.

Hoi An has long been famous for its commerce. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was an important trading port for Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Indian and French sea merchants, and between the 7th and 10th centuries, its wealthy Champa residents (those of Malay-Polynesian heritage) controlled the regional spice trade.

At the heart of the city is the Hoi An Ancient Town, a UNESCO world heritage site with a distinctly international

Eat, drink and shop your way through Vietnam's ancient trading port of Hoi An.

BY VANESSA MURRAY

flavour. From the quaintly shuttered, historical French- and Chinese-style houses lining the cobbled laneways, to the Japanese Covered Bridge that straddles an off-shoot of the Thu Bon River, Hoi An will charm even the most jaded of travellers.

Its heritage protection means the Ancient Town is blissfully free of cars and buses. Motorbikes are still allowed, and it seems there is an easy rider touting for business on every corner.

But unless you plan on going further afield — say to nearby Cua Dai Beach (the legendary China Beach where US soldiers took their rest and relaxation), to scuba diving hot spot the Cu Lao Cham Marine Park, or to the ancient Cham city of My Son — Hoi An is easy to get around on foot.

Hiring a bicycle, complete with basket, is also a fabulous way to take in the scenery local style.

Back to the tailor's shop,

where I am torn between a jacket in this cut or that, red or blue or green. Do I want a zip or buttons? Perhaps a hood? Patterned silk lining, or plain?

And then there are the trousers, skirts, shirts, dresses, ties, suits, and shoes to navigate; all well-made, cut-price potential additions to my wardrobe.

Like the heritage houses open for view, businesses here have often been in the family for generations, and they're concerned that everything is just right.

Hoi An is home to more than 300 tailors, and shops selling local crafts — from handbags and jewellery to traditional tea sets, lanterns and musical instruments — are also in abundance.

Shopping works up an appetite, and fortunately Hoi An is a foodie's delight.

With local and French-fusion style restaurants scattered about at regular intervals, you'll never go hungry.

Dine on the cheap by stocking up on fresh fish and produce at the early morning food market, or go all out at restaurants such as Cargo Club, or Mango-Rooms Restaurant and Cafe on Nguyen Thai Hoc Street, where Mick Jagger once called in for a bite.

Be sure to try local specialties such as cao lau — doughy flat noodles mixed with croutons, bean sprouts and greens, topped with pork slices and served in a savoury broth; or white rose dumplings — delicately steamed and stuffed with shrimp.

If you want to improve your culinary skills, there are many cooking classes on offer here, such as at the Hai Cafe on Tran Phu Street, which offers an evening class followed by dinner.

Just take care not to overdo it; after all, you don't want to outgrow the perfectly tailored outfit you just purchased. ●

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Various vaccinations are recommended; check with a travel medicine clinic.

Getting there: Hoi An is a half-hour taxi ride from Da Nang international airport. Various international carriers offer flights to Da Nang; see your local travel agent. Connect domestically with Vietnam Airlines, Pacific Airlines and Jetstar Pacific, or make the journey by overnight train from Hanoi (791km, 15 hours) or Saigon (935km, 18 hours).

Where to stay: Quality accommodation abounds in Hoi An. The Hoi An Hotel is a short walk across the Thu Bon River from the Old Town.

With modern, comfortable and well-serviced rooms from \$25 a night for a double room, it's a bargain.

More upmarket options include the Pho Hoi Riverside Resort (\$50 a night), or the luxurious Hoi An Riverside Resort and Spa located 3km from the town centre (\$US215 a night).

More information:
www.guidevietnam.com
www.tripadvisor.com
www.hoiantravel.com



Lanterns for sale in a shop in Hoi An.



The Japanese Covered Bridge over Thu Bon River.



Antiques on display.