

Nems and 'Nam trains Another side of Vietnam

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Hopping on and off night trains, I travel from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi, discovering paradisiacal beaches, priceless eateries, remote towns and swathes of jungle en route.

I'd been warned to buy a silk sleeping bag and I was glad I did when I crossed the railway tracks at midnight and joined the crowd hauling heavy bags, slack chickens and sleepy children onto the night train.

After consulting with other travellers I'd booked the bottom bunk of a soft sleeper train. "The TN trains are cheaper but painfully slow, crowded and the hard sleeper has six berths in the same space. You sleep on a wooden plank, whereas the soft sleeper has four bunks and the semblance of a mattress", Avril, who I met in Ho Chi Minh's trendy Q Bar had told me earlier.

I planned to take a leisurely jaunt along the coastline between Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi, getting on and off when I wanted, and (since I only had a week) the night train seemed like a great option. I'd travel as I slept leaving my days free for exploring, whilst also saving money on hotel bills.

Known, rather ironically, as the Reunification Express, Vietnam's north-south line holds the record for having the world's slowest trains, so leisurely would be a massive understatement.



Built by the French when the region was part of French Indochina, the track, which was inaugurated in 1936, was divided along the Hien Luong Bridge during the Vietnam War. Badly damaged by constant bomb attacks, it was only fully re-established in 1975, after the fall of Saigon.

Arriving in Ho Chi Minh I discover that if you plan to get off the train at different points you can't buy one through ticket; instead you have to book each leg of the journey separately. In the backpacker district of Pham Ngu Lao I find plenty of travel agents, who, for a small commission, book my ticket for Nha Trang and arrange for a taxi to take me to the train station that evening. "If you ever book a train ticket via a hotel make sure they don't charge you for a soft sleeper then book you a hard one," the agent advises. "It's a popular scam in hotels and once you're on the train it's too late to complain."

Fellow travellers told me that the buffet cars on most trains are packed with smokers and serve awful food, so in the backstreets near Pham Ngu Lao I stock up on easy-to-snack street food...deep fried Nem Ran rolls stuffed with pork, yam and crab, Goi Cuon rice paper rolls bursting at the seams with shrimp, herbs and vermicelli, and the rice flour pancake, Banh Xeo, filled with pork, shrimps and bean sprouts.

At Napoly I stop off for a Kem (icecream) packed with gooey chunks of toasted coconut, candied cherry and pineapple served in a coconut shell, then take the ten minute taxi ride to the station. A few minutes before 2300 hours I stumble across the tracks, battling with other passengers to scramble aboard the train for Nha Trang.

As a woman travelling solo I'm nervous at the idea of spending the night in a cramped, four-bed cabin with strangers so it's a relief to find myself with a friendly Vietnamese couple and their toddler, who is already sleeping like a log. "You have a lower bunk. There is more space for your head and you can get in and out of bed without disturbing everyone," the husband says admiringly.

Crawling into the lower bunk, which has grey sheets and a grubby blanket, but also boasts a view out of the window, I fall asleep, rocked by the click-clack of the narrow gauge rails. I awake just in time to stumble off the train at Nha Trang.

Backed by mountains, and bordering a beautiful sandy, beach-lined curve of bay, this popular resort bustles with backpackers...most of whom seem to be heading out on an-all-you-can-drink 'booze cruise' when I arrive at 6am.

Along Tran Phu Street I visit the quirky little Yersin museum, filled with artefacts of the Swiss French doctor who discovered the plague bacillus here in 1894. I then stagger up the steps to admire spectacular views from the Long Son pagoda with its skyscraper high white Buddha dedicated to monks who died demonstrating against the Diem government.

One of my travel goals is to taste as many local specialities as possible, so I head for Duong Phuong Hotel to eat Bird's Nest Soup, said to be the best in Vietnam. Unfortunately to my, evidently inane, palate it tastes like rubbery chicken cartilage.

Along a spectacular coast road looping past pristine beaches, dotted with bamboo coracles the size of tractor tyres, a taxi takes me 24km north of Nha Trang to Paradise resort, which is owned by eccentric, voluble Frenchman Mr. Chere. The \$25 a night cost gets me a spacious sea-view bungalow, one of a dozen clustered along a sandy beach overlooking the remote little fishing village of Dong Hai...as well as three sumptuous meals a day.

Nha Trang's train station west of the cathedral is surrounded by shops, where two days later and aching with sunburn, I stock up on snacks for the next leg of my trip to Hue.

Once again there's a stampede when the train pulls in at 2349 hrs, but this time I'm positioned near the front of the queue and get on without too much pushing and shoving. The cabin is filthy – the floor is strewn with the black and white striped husks of sunflower seeds and the rumped sheets have already been slept in.

Slipping in to my precious silk sleeping bag, I chat with my travel companions, a young Hue couple, who tell me that Tinh Gia Vien is the place to go for the best of Hue's imperial cuisine. Food evolved from cuisine that was once served at the Emperor's table.



facts:

Travel agency (for booking train tickets):

→ www.vietnamimpressive.com

Timetable and fare information: → www.vr.com.vn

Useful Tips:

- Pay in Vietnamese Dong at ticket offices, US dollars are rarely accepted
- Book the newer SE1 and SE2 trains, most of which have four berth soft class air-conditioned sleepers and a restaurant or buffet car
- Be sure of clean sheets and pillows by paying a bit extra for a sleeping bag with Livitrans, a private company that operates a separate car attached to certain train lines

Gourmet Pitstops

Hoi An - Tucked down a sidestreet Hoi An's family run Café 43 (43 Tran Cao Van) serves local specialties including the rice paper, prawns and garlic dish Banh Bao

Nha Trang - Locals flock to eat at Lac Canh (44D Nguyen Binh Khiem) a friendly eatery where you can make your own table top barbecue or sup on squid, lobster and other seafood dishes

Da Nang - Try an authentic Vietnamese breakfast head for Tru Clam Vien (41 Nguy n Van Linh) a popular local restaurant famed for its baguettes, sweet coffee and noodle dishes



The train journey, 300 kms north, takes 13 hours, so I have plenty of time to watch waterlogged rice fields, dense jungle and Vietnam War graveyards flash by before getting out at Hue's imposing red brick Ga.

This centrally situated town, backed by the Truong Son Mountains is renowned for its bad-tempered weather, so I'm lucky to have spring (warm) sunshine as I stroll around the sprawling complex of temples, shops and museums in the walled citadel...once the centre of the Nguyen dynasty.

If night trains are good for the wallet, the so-called soft sleepers are hard on the bones, so on the advice of Bao at La Residence, the stunning Indochina era sleepery with art deco rooms where I'm staying, I take a taxi seven kilometres out of town that afternoon and soothe my aching limbs in the hot sulphur mineral springs of My An Hot Spring and Spa.

That night I head for Tinh Gia Vien, which turns out to be an upmarket restaurant with a lovely shaded garden with more than 400 Bonsai trees and a waterfall, inside the citadel. Splashing out, I order the \$20 set menu: Bún Bò Hu (noodle soup) served with slices of beef and lashings of chilli oil, followed by clam and rice dish, Com, and crunchy tapioca and shrimp pastries called Loc.

The train dips inland after Hue, so I take the spectacular three hour bus ride via the cave and sanctuary riddled limestone marble mountains, to Hoi An next morning.

A UNESCO world heritage site, this enchanting town, established as a major trading centre for spices by the Chams in the 7th century, is packed with ornate, two storey, wooden beam merchant houses.

After a magical day wandering around the labyrinth of cobbled streets fenced in by Chinese temples, colonnaded colonial houses, fine jewellery stores and tailor shops, I sit in flickering candlelight at a food stall overlooking the turgid Thu Bon River. Eating Cao Lau, the rapid local noodle dish topped with slices of roast pork, dough fritters and herbs, I wait for the taxi, which takes me the 40 minute ride to Da Nang, for the last leg of my trip.

After balmy February temperatures in Da Nang, I'm not prepared for the chilly weather travelling north and, despite the blanket provided with my bunk, I'm shivering when I stumble out of the train at Hanoi at 0536 hrs the next morning.

My train journey is over. I've travelled the 1,726 kms from Ho Chi Minh in the south, to Hanoi on Vietnam's northern tip and had plenty of time to explore. I'm looking forward to sleeping in a proper bed again, but I've had a great week eating nems and taking night trains through Vietnam. ■■

