

A Human Portrait of Hanoi in the Old Quarter

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“You will be surprised with the amount of motorcycles traveling on the city streets,” my friend Binh warned me of Hanoi before I arrived in the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Having just arrived in my hotel in the Old Quarter, I felt excited with the bustling atmosphere of the area. The air was very humid and it was so hot, I was sweating in my cotton t-shirt.

Just in front of my hotel is a road where buses, motorcycles, cars, bicycles and sometimes cyclos (a kind of rickshaw) pass back and forth. I was not really surprised, it is just busier than any road in Jakarta. Amid the honks and sounds of vehicles, the riders seemed relaxed — even when some motorcycles seemed about to collide.

Hanoi has 12 boroughs and the Old Quarter is located in Hoan Kiem, which was named after a lake. The Old Quarter is about 1,000 years old and was the country's capital during the reign of emperor Ly Thai from 1009 to 1028 AD, but it didn't become a bustling center for commerce until the 15th century.

Hoan Kiem consists of 36 streets, with each selling a specific product. As a result, the street is named after the merchandise it specializes in. However, for those who want to shop for a bit of everything, there are places that offer a variety of knick-knacks, from clothing to jewelry.

Out of all the boroughs in Hanoi, the Old Quarter is the most fascinating. It is like the soul of the city; a cultural and human portrait of Hanoi as it accurately reflects the real life of locals — not a fabricated facade for tourists.

The city still boasts its original street layout, as well as buildings dating back to the 15th century. The narrow roads of the Old Quarter are lined by pedestrian lanes

on both sides. The typical buildings found in this borough are two or three-story shophouses, where the ground floors are used as a place of business and the top floors house the living quarters.

I noticed that a majority of the vendors were women, with some carrying their merchandise — like fruits and vegetables — in baskets on their shoulders or bicycles, while others simply display their products on the side of the road.

Over all, everybody is working. While most market places tend to be dirty with scattered trash, the Old Quarter is amazingly clean.

My morning in Hoan Kiem was greeted with the offer of tea at a sidewalk cafe in front of my hotel. Sidewalk cafes are very typical of Hanoi. They are usually just a small place in front of a shop or just by the sidewalk, thanks to the wide pedestrian lane. In every corner of Old Quarter I can easily find a sidewalk cafe, sometimes the whole street is occupied by them, with customers leisurely sipping glass of coffee or tea while sitting on short plastic stools, chatting with their colleagues or just watching passers by. Despite sitting next to busy street, it was surprisingly a relaxing atmosphere. One morning I was even serenaded by a street singer.

I joined the ritual of Hanoians and ordered unsweetened green tea while my companions sipped Vietnamese coffee, a popular choice for customers.

Coffee was introduced to Vietnam by the French when they colonized the country in the 19th century. Vietnam has since then turned into a major producer of coffee and coffee beans, which are readily available in shops across the capital.

A must-try is a glass of cold coffee with condensed milk resting at the bottom and some ice cubes; it truly is a very refreshing drink for a hot afternoon.

In addition to various beverages, Hanoi's sidewalk cafes also offer traditional Vietnamese dishes, such as pho — a bowl of rice noodle soup with meat and herbs. Pho vendors are also a very common sight in the capital, with some sellers using permanent kiosks, while others simply carry the necessary ingredients in two large baskets.

Both the sidewalk cafes and pho vendors are open throughout the day, serving customers an early morning breakfast before work, a quick lunch and a relaxing dinner.

The Old Quarter really offers a colorful picture of life in Hanoi.



A corner of the Old Quarter in the Vietnamese capital.
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