



Commotion in the city

HO CHI MINH CITY IS ABUZZ WITH ACTIVITY, A TOWN THAT HARDLY SEEMS TO BREATHE, LET ALONE SLEEP. IT IS CHAOTIC, IT IS CRAZY AND IT IS ALWAYS INTERESTING.

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

9am

Start the day at Au Parc, a Turkish-styled café on Han Thuyen overlooking 30/4 Park, named after Vietnam's Liberation Day. The leafy, green ambience provides some relative calm before the storm that is Ho Chi Minh City's traffic chaos – the estimated 4 million motorbikes and scooters roaring around the city turns crossing the road into a game of chicken. Nearby is the 1960s-styled Independence Palace. The first Communist tanks to rumble through what was then Saigon crashed through the wrought-iron gates here and it seems as though time has stood still ever since. The ticket will set you back just over a dollar, which is worth paying for the basement war rooms, telecommunications centre, and warren of tunnels that would make the perfect movie set.

WWW.AUPARCSAIGON.COM

WWW.DINHDOCLAP.GOV.VN/INDEX-EN.HTML

11am

Make sure you're emotionally fortified before you tackle The War Remnants Museum, ironically housed within the wartime offices of the US Information Service. While the historical portrayal of the Vietnam War is undoubtedly one-sided and horribly graphic, there are few museums that drive home the brutality of war

so effectively. Look for the striking *Requiem* exhibition upstairs by photographer Tim Page. Be warned, you may want to give this museum a miss if you're travelling with children.

HTTP://WARREMNANTSMUSEUM.COM

1pm

Soothe your soul and sate your appetite at bustling Tan Tong Loi at 311 Vo Van Thanh. It doesn't look like much, but this grubby little eatery dishes up mouthwatering bowls of shrimp wonton soup and duck legs doused in a rich hoisin sauce. Menus are scarce, perhaps as they only offer these two delicacies. Point to other diner's bowls to order. Outside, pick up a roadside *sinh to*. This drink combines fresh fruit, ice and condensed milk into a creamy, sweet shake. Despite looking like green sludge, the avocado version is delicious.

2pm

Flag down a *xe om* [motorbike taxi] and haggle for a ride to the Jade Emperor Pagoda. This atmospheric incense-scented temple built in 1909 is packed with statues of divinities from Buddhist and Taoist lore. Detour by the small pond in the grounds to see the turtles which lend the pagoda its nickname of "Tortoise Pagoda." Outside on Dien Bien Phu, street

vendors sell all manner of wares from cheap motorbike helmets to goldfish in plastic bags.

4pm

Bike it back to Le Loi to Mekong Creations, a not-for-profit venture generating employment for women in rural villages in Vietnam and Cambodia. Profits from sales of the hand-made products are returned to the villages directly in the form of salaries, and indirectly in funding for community development projects. From here, stroll to Benh Thanh market for vigorous bargaining on local handicrafts and souvenirs. For more retail therapy, wander past Pham Ngu Lao's backpacker-oriented cafes and stores.

WWW.MEKONG-CREATIONS.ORG

7.00pm

For dinner, head to Quan An Ngon 138 across the road from Reunification Palace, serving an upmarket version of street food from across Vietnam. Sample multiple dishes, but make sure you try the *banh xeo* [savoury pancakes] and *goi cuon* [spring rolls]. For after-dinner beverages, try La Fenetre Soleil on Ly Tu Trong. The bare-brick walls and art-deco furniture evoke the glamour of old Saigon. ☺

WWW.NGON138.COM

WWW.LAFENETRESOLEIL.COM