


LIFESTYLE

# Vietnam's unseen coastal paradise

Caroline Berdon  Published: Thursday, 18 July 2019 11:49 am



Cam Ranh, formerly a naval port in southeast Vietnam, has opened up to tourists in recent years. Credit: AAP

The white sand is already scorching my feet when I take an early morning stroll along the beach on Cam Ranh Bay in southeastern Vietnam. The turquoise-green water shows barely a ripple at this time of day. After arriving late the night before from the bustling capital Hanoi, I can't quite believe my luck.

This is not what I had expected on my first trip to this Southeast Asian country. Humidity, chaotic cities and good food yes, but not beaches from paradise.

The Cam Ranh peninsula has only opened up to tourists in recent years. In the past, the deepwater bay has served as a military port for Vietnam's long line of invaders: the French, the British and the Americans - oh and the Russians once stationed boats here too.

High-end hotel developers are queuing up to stake a claim on this new, prime slice of real estate, and there is plenty of construction along the northern stretch of the bay - a contrast to the serenity out at sea.

Thankfully, my colonial-style resort The Anam is a vast, tranquil haven of tropical gardens, water fountains, spongy green lawns and lagoon-style infinity pools. It's an Instagrammer's dream, and there are plenty of props around - such as romantic double swinging seats - to help you capture that perfect, languorous shot.

The villas also delight, harking back to the Indochine era, with lanterns and big-bellied water vases, mosaic floor tiles, and baths in enclaves with grand views of palm-fringed courtyards.

When I visit in June, the start of the local summer holiday, the hotel is close to full occupancy. There are plenty of Australians among the guests too, with Jetstar now flying direct to Ho Chi Minh City. I wonder if people ever leave the resort; there is little need and no one seems in any hurry.

Despite The Anam's popularity, it's 300 metres of Long Beach reserved purely for guests remains almost empty. Perhaps it's too hot, perhaps people prefer the pools. I'm not complaining; I float about in my tropical bath while gazing at the necklace of surrounding jungle-swathed mountains, the dribble of offshore islands and the traditional sampan bobbing among them.

This ocean is a trove of delights, offering stunning coral reefs and some of the country's best diving and snorkelling. From the hotel, there is also kayaking, sailing, surfing and body-boarding on offer.

While the beach and ocean are heavenly, what gets me most excited by The Anam is its food. The Colonial Restaurant offers fine dining European fare with a focus on French dishes, while the Indochine serves delectable buffets. But my favourite is Lang Viet Restaurant, with panoramic views of the lawns, beach and ocean.

Vietnamese food, with its fresh, punchy flavours, is a highlight of any trip and The Anam captures them perfectly in a cooking class at Lang Viet. My chef talks me through the essential ingredients: garlic, shallots, chilli, lemongrass and ginger. Side by side we create Vietnamese fresh hand rolls, sweet and sour fish soup, simmering fish with caramel in a clay pot, chicken with lemongrass, and green papaya and beef salad. I feast on my endeavours for lunch and take home a book of the recipes.

As much as I don't want to tear myself away from The Anam, I force myself. After all, one of Vietnam's liveliest resorts is just a half hour's drive north along the coast.

A city of over 500,000, Nha Trang is best loved for its six-kilometre sandy beach and impressive promenade dotted with parks and sculpture gardens. It's perfect for an early evening walk, when a welcome breeze wafts in over the waves after another steamy day.

The city's main attractions include the striking 19th-century Long Son Pagoda, decorated in mosaic dragons and with stunning views over Nha Trang; the Po Ngar Cham Towers, built by the early Hindu empire in the eighth century and still used in Buddhist worship; and for the less spiritual, Vinpearl, Vietnam's biggest theme park, whose flashing neon lights glisten in the snaking Cai River.

I spend the late afternoon zipping around the city on two wheels with David, my own guide from Nha Trang Vespa Tours. He asks me what I love about Vietnamese food, what I have and haven't tried, and devises an itinerary of street food stalls and eateries he thinks I'll love. He nails it - we taste Vietnamese omelettes stuffed with mussels, shrimp and chicken, fluffy rice-flour pancakes, and traditional pho made with homemade noodles. I begin to understand why the Vietnamese find European fare so bland.

As night falls we wander under the night markets' hanging lanterns, drinking pretty milky drinks stuffed with fruit, jelly and tapioca balls. There's the usual tacky bags and clothes on display but sellers here are remarkably passive compared to other parts of the world, so I can take in the experience in peace.

We end the night with cocktails at the high-up Havana Beach Club, which enjoys the best views in town. I gaze out across the lit-up reverie of Nha Trang to the black East Sea beyond (don't call it the South China Sea here) and the twinkling dots of boats fishing for squid.

And I look south down the dark coastline towards the peaceful haven of Cam Ranh, which many people in this city below wouldn't even know was there.

## IF YOU GO

**GETTING THERE:** Jetstar operates three flights per week between Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City, from \$279 one way (conditions apply). Jetstar Pacific operates domestic flights within

Vietnam. For more info, visit [www.jetstar.com](http://www.jetstar.com)

Cam Ranh International Airport is one hour's flight from Ho Chi Minh City and an hour and a half from Hanoi.

STAYING THERE: The Anam has a wide selection of elegant villas, some with private pools. Rooms start from around \$250 per night. For more info, visit [www.theanam.com](http://www.theanam.com)

The writer travelled as a guest of The Anam and Jetstar.

## **'I picked up William Tyrrell': Dying man claimed he drove toddler 300km from home**

He was so distressed following the conversation he placed his head on his carer's shoulder.

William Tyrrell

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