

# A sensory trail

With its imperial legacy and cultural offerings, the city of Hue never fails to please the senses, says Rod Mackenzie



Central Vietnam is enjoying a boom. Take one glance at its stunning beaches lapped by the warm waters of the South China Sea, and it's easy to see why it's tipped to become one of South East Asia's hottest new vacation spots. More and more high-class resorts are springing up here, with Nick Faldo's eagerly anticipated championship golf course at Laguna Hue (scheduled to open end of 2012) the most high profile of them all. One of the side benefits of all this development is that it should bring more attention to Hue, one of Vietnam's most charming little cities.

Hue is such a sensual place. Pronounced "whey", it's hard to even utter its name without pouting one's lips into a kiss. Tucked away a few miles inland from the sea, the former imperial capital of the Nguyen dynasty has a relaxed, small town feel. So while it lacks the big, brash draws of its much larger, louder cousins Ho Chi Minh City to the south or Hanoi up north, it manages to score by teasing the senses in subtler, more unexpected ways.

Take its main natural feature, the Perfume River that cuts a serene path through the city centre. Probably like many visitors, I was eager to test the aroma as soon as I could, so I flagged down a cyclo and directed its driver to pedal me to the nearest crossing at Phu Xuan Bridge. With my nose pointing in the air and rush hour motorcycle traffic brushing past my elbows, the atmosphere seemed more like eau de Yamaha than rich cologne. Only later did I discover how in

former times vessels laden with cargoes of sweet smelling flowers regularly sailed downstream into town.

I didn't feel let down though – the views were more than sweet enough. Below, an armada of ornately painted wooden dragon boats meandered leisurely upstream taking passengers on cruises to view elaborate 19<sup>th</sup> century royal tombs and other historic sights such as the seven-tiered Thien Mu Pagoda ('Celestial Lady Pagoda') built in 1601, one of the oldest and prettiest religious buildings in the country.

This was once the playground of powerful emperors and their most impressive legacy rose up across from me on the north bank of the river. Hue's Citadel, its fortified stone walls glowing warmly in the sunlight, was built over three decades from 1805 to protect the home of the imperial royal court that ruled here until the dynasty's fall in 1945. The outer walls rise up to seven metres in height and stretch for some 11km running alongside a moat, fully enclosing the emperor's vast complex including the Forbidden City (based on Beijing's example) at its core. It's now deemed a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and efforts are ongoing to repair the ravages of age and some of the terrible devastation inflicted during the Vietnam War.

A sudden loud crack high in the sky startled me, conjuring visions of gunfire. But it was simply a super-sized Vietnamese flag flapping in the breeze, the massive golden-yellow star almost upstaging the blazing tropical sun. Held

Top, from left: Incense sticks sold on the street; an imperial-style dish of rice with pork, shrimp, lotus seeds and vegetables steamed in a lotus leaf; lotus flower at Thien Mu Pagoda. Facing page: Ornate archway leading to Hue's Forbidden City



La Residence hotel stands on the banks of the Perfume River in Hue. Based on the 1930s residence of the French Governor, elegant Art Deco design motifs flow through the property



aloft by a 37-metre high pole – the tallest in the country – it appears like an optical illusion, placing everything around it completely out of scale. I felt so tiny and insignificant as I scurried beneath its mighty shadow towards the Citadel's main entrance at Ngo Mon Gate – but perhaps that's the point, I thought.

Once inside, the Citadel's scale is similarly overwhelming. In one large quadrangle visitors are invited to take a turn riding on an elephant. Even aboard one of these great beasts, it still takes 20 minutes to do a circuit. And that's just one small corner of the Citadel's complex.

Conquered by the searing afternoon heat, I retreated back to the south bank of the Perfume River for a pleasantly shaded riverbank stroll to the calm of my hotel, La Residence ([www.la-residence-hue.com](http://www.la-residence-hue.com)). Built in 1930 as the French Governor's official residence, this three-storey riverside mansion spent much of the postwar years as a retreat for government dignitaries and a venue for state events, but then came a dramatic makeover as a luxurious boutique hotel in 2005, which saw it gain two new wings in the elegant Art Deco style of the original. Fortunately the vintage high-ceilinged interiors and detailing were retained, including patterned tiled floors, dark wood paneling and silk furnishings. I was given a sneak peek of the huge airy Resident Suite, on the top floor of the old governor's house, with a claw-foot tub in the bathroom and a wonderful rooftop terrace with splendid views out over the hotel's saltwater pool to the river. It felt like I was stepping out on to the first-class deck of a grand 1920s ocean liner.

Taste, my final sensation – and perhaps Hue's most prized of all – was up next. The city's speciality is 'imperial'

cuisine, a highly refined style of cooking devised by former court chefs in which aesthetics and harmonious balance of ingredients are held paramount. As a fan of today's trend for simple cooking and lighter flavours, I felt a little nervous as I took a seat at Khong Gian Xua, a palatial wood-beamed 'pillar house' restaurant. Would I be thrown in the royal dungeons if I turned up my nose? I needn't have worried as the first few courses – delicate *banh beo*, steamed rice pancakes stuffed with fried pork and crumbled shrimp, and tangy pork and pineapple spring rolls – showed fuss-free presentation yet oozed with fresh flavour. And once the elaborate main courses arrived – melt-in-the-mouth beef on skewers protruding from a whole pineapple, its crown adorned with carved carrot and lemongrass 'jewels', followed by fragrant clay pot fish fillet – I had become a fully fledged royalist.

For dessert, I decided to take a walk downtown where I stumbled upon La Boulangerie Francaise ([www.laboulangieriefraancaise.org](http://www.laboulangieriefraancaise.org)), a tiny, simply furnished cafe squeezed into a side street a couple of blocks back from the river. You wouldn't guess it by looking at the window full of finely crafted gateaux and tarts, but this is actually a charity that helps disadvantaged young Vietnamese to find jobs by offering training in the bakery and pastry business. The fact that nearly every table was taken tells you all you need to know. A splendid discovery that delivers on many levels – that for me sums up Hue. Simply sensational, in other words. ■

*Singapore Airlines flies to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City daily. Domestic flights connect direct to Hue. SilkAir flies to Danang four times weekly, from where it's approximately a two-hour drive to Hue by taxi.*