

Tasty treats

Claire Boobyer eats out in Hanoi

Near the railway arches in northern Hanoi, a row of Coke cans caught my attention. The heads of tiny blackened chickens, bodies straight-jacketed into the cans and gnarled claws poking out of the lid tops, formed a curious culinary line-up. The small birds looked like the collected petrified remains from a volcanic eruption – remnants of a sort of Vietnamese Pompeii.

I sat down inside the tiny restaurant – crammed with just five tables – and ordered blackened bird, *Ga Den*. The stewed chicken was yanked out of the can and dumped in a bowl of oily black liquid. Unappealing at first sight, it was, on first taste, a rich liquid infused with the flavours of minty leaves, lotus seeds and dissolving fruits.

The owners of 'Tan' stall at 12A Hang Cot watched me attack the lean fowl with chopsticks. Encouraged by my eagerness to consume all parts of the bird, they presented me with a tray of sweets.

Banh troi are small blobs of glistening white glutinous rice, stuffed with palm sugar juice. I bit tentatively into the dumpling, instead of consuming it whole, and it spurted its juice all over my hair and clothes.

The Vietnamese owners were rendered incapacitated by their own giggles, revealing teeth and mouths as black as their *Ga Den*, stained by decades of betel-nut chewing. Despite my culinary *faux pas*, entreaties to return to their foodstall fluttered out into the night behind me. **t**



Claire Boobyer is the author of Footprint's *Vietnam Handbook*. Footprint is offering *Traveller* readers a 40 per cent discount

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A visit to Vietnam

WEXAS Far East specialist Gemma Rutt enjoyed some of Vietnam's best bits when she travelled the length of the country



Of all the countries I visited on my round-the-world trip, Vietnam was my favourite.

The country was so easy to travel around, whether on buses, trains or road. The coastal route from Hoi An to Nha Trang is world-famous for its breath-taking views. My trip started in Hanoi, where there was a terrific range of things to see and do. It's a taste of old Vietnam, with a European elegance to the city's architecture and Parisian-



Halong the way

Halong Bay is one of Vietnam's most appealing destinations. As managing director and co-owner of Cruise Halong, **Sonny Bui** knows the best ways to get the most from the area, and he shares his insights with us.

What is everyday life like in Halong Bay?

Hectic. There is an exciting fish market near the waterfront, and in the picturesque bay tour boats and fishing boats ply their trade near fishing villages with floating houses and a temple, and in the middle of all this, you can see children going to and from school, pedalling away on bamboo boats...

What makes Halong Bay such a popular attraction for visitors?

Halong Bay is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a lovely stretch of water with over 3,000 limestone islands, several of them with amazing caves which are only

accessible by boat. The area's remarkable geology supports a wide range of flora and fauna.

What are the highlights of a cruise in Halong Bay?

Overnight cruises are the best way to explore this beautiful part of the world. Our boats are like small boutique hotels that happen to be mobile, so guests can fully explore the lagoons. They can stop to visit local people in fishing villages, take a kayak into the tunnels and caves, stay on board to participate in cookery classes that show the diversity of Vietnamese cuisine, greet each new day with Tai Chi exercises on the sundeck and end it with sunset cocktails – on a quiet beach.