

# XEO QUIT

Words & photos by Claire Boobyer

*Deep in cajeput forest in the Mekong Delta, Vietnamese soldiers hid submerged for hours in underground chambers during the American War.*

Escaping targeted American bombing, some 25 VC hunkered down in these tiny water-logged cavities built next to the root-clogged canals of Xeo Quit forest, east of Cao Lanh. Xeo Quit means 'small stream of mandarins'. Before the American War, the vivid orange fruit had sprouted everywhere but the American bombardment of the area put an end to that, guide Nguyen Thanh Nguyen explained. More than 30 years after the end of the war, visitors can step into a small wooden canoe and be paddled through the undergrowth past the well-camouflaged chambers and rudimentary camp sites, built at a later stage. Women dressed in the black uniform of the Vietnamese soldier (an outfit that helped conceal their movements) with the 'khan choang' black and white chequered scarf around their necks and wearing the hat, the 'non tai beo' slowly negotiate the tiny, winding waterways much as the VC would have done on first entering the dense foliage. The flaking marmelade-shaded bark of the cajeput tree occasionally scattered into the water, black-and-white polka dot butterflies flitted through the shafts of sunlight; water hyacinth parted as the boat manoeuvred under fallen trees, and the brilliant turquoise blue of the kingfisher illuminated the greens and dark browns of the woody scene.

And all around, pretty curtains of ivy that have conquered tall tree trunks give the impression of skirt-wearing trees. "Sometimes, the VC hid behind the veils of ivy as you can see it is quite thick," whispered Nguyen as our boat slopped through the narrow shallows. Most visitors in Vietnam are familiar with the Cu Chi tunnels northwest of Saigon where VC lived in subterranean tunnels to escape American detection but here the VC were protecting the communist cadres of the Dong Thap Provincial Party committee. They first hid here in 1966 after informants passed their details to US command and the Americans swooped; they remained in the area until 1975. There are more than 20 bunkers across an area of forest that stretches for 50 hectares. "About four Vietnamese soldiers would climb into a chamber of about one square metre," explained Nguyen. "The lids were made from a 10 centimetre slab of wood and mud was piled on top. The VC would hide in these bunkers for up to three hours and breathe through a bamboo pole. Sometimes they would have to immerse themselves in the canals and used the bamboo stalks as straws too." "The Americans knew they were in the area but had no way of knowing where because the bunkers were well hidden so they would send in dogs to sniff for human presence but the VC would scatter pepper around the bamboo breathing holes to put the dogs off the scent." VC on duty at Xeo Quit would eat snake and catch fish (the King Cobra is prolific in these parts) but conditions were difficult and many men died of cold, hunger, snake bite and in the aftermath of bombing.







After the Paris Accords in 1973 that ended the American involvement in Vietnam, the communists set up meeting halls. "Although the Americans had left this area," said Nguyen, "the Vietnamese were still fighting each other." The boat paddles past several of these spartan camp bases - the bedroom of Nguyen Dac Loc, deputy chief of the provincial party committee's secretariat (1973-1975) - as well as skull-and-bone signs warning locals of the danger of unexploded ordinance. The red signs are accompanied by another alert indicator - dried and draped banana leaves. After the boat trip, visitors wander along the paths that wind through the flaking paperbark landscape passing the camp kitchen, meeting halls and guesthouse. One chamber has been recreated for visitors to walk through. It is four metres long and a copy of an original, said Nguyen. Old VC who are now in their 80s were invited back to advise on sizing and layout. With these tangible camp operations it's easier to imagine the VC meeting amid the jungle cover. After 1975 the site lay dormant and people lived here to protect the forest. In 1992, the Ministry of Culture adopted the site; if it had not been protected, this beautiful forest, now reclaimed by birds - especially the majestic kingfisher - butterflies and plopping mudfish, would have been turned over to paddy.

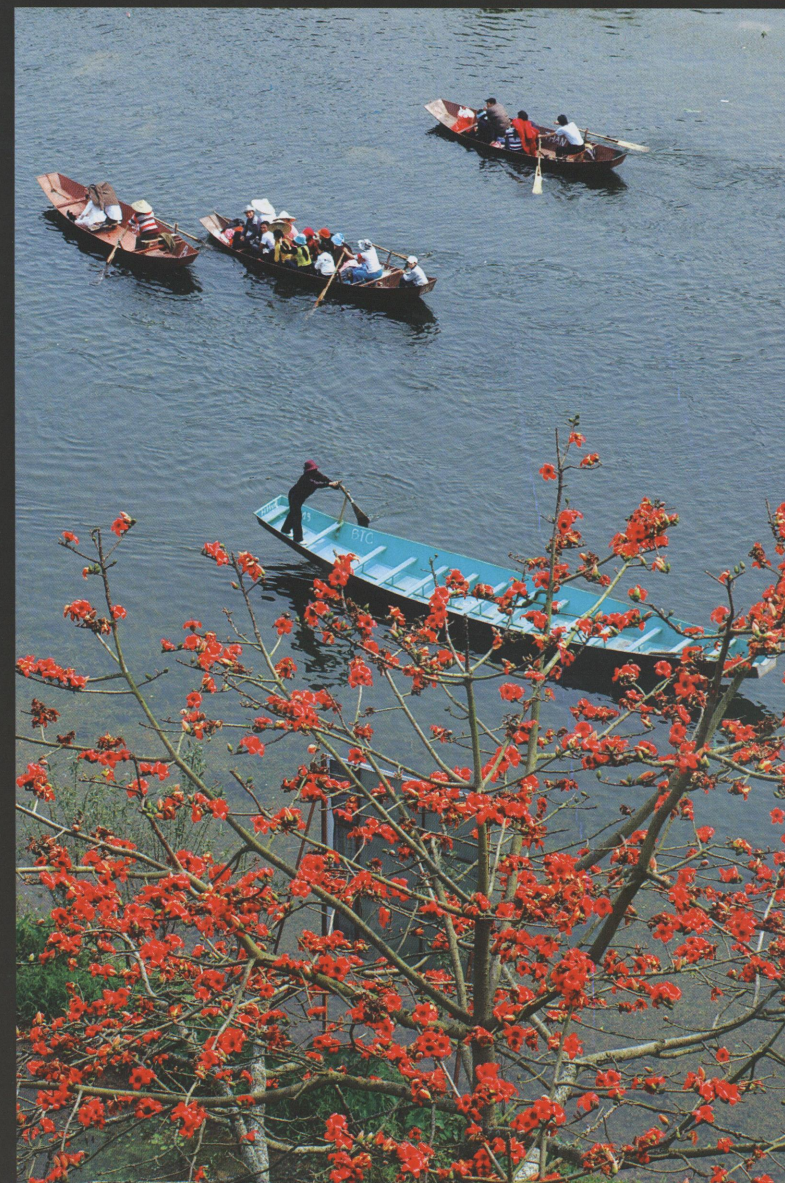
**PRACTICALS:**

30 km east of Cao Lanh and 6 km north of the highway, only marked by a sign to the Xeo Quit restaurant.  
 5000d entrance, open 0730-1700 daily. Tel: (84-67) 3504 733  
 The boat ride is 25 minutes and the optional walk can take between 30-45 minutes.  
 Next to the restaurant is a small exhibition centre containing artefacts relating to the VC activity: there are clothes, weapons, knives, hospital equipment and old field telephones (descriptions are in Vietnamese only.)  
 Nguyen Thanh Nguyen is the only English-speaking guide at the site. He requires one-two days' notice: Tel: 09182 73125.



# Huong Pagoda

## FESTIVAL



The Huong Pagoda Festival starts on the 6th of January and lasts until the end of March (lunar calendar). It takes place in Huong Son Commune, My Duc District, Hanoi, 70 kilometers from the centre of the city. Going to the Huong Pagoda Festival in the first days of the year, people not only wish for good health, luck and success; they also enjoy sightseeing around the mountains and river.

Photos by Lekima  
 Provided by photo.vn