

A break from the norm

The golfing path between Australia and southeast Asia may be well trodden, but Vietnam provides a refreshing change from the usual suspects, reckons Peter Ellegard



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rossing the road in Vietnam is akin to taking your life in your hands. No sooner do you step off the kerb into the road than a tsunami of mopeds, scooters and motorbikes is bearing down on you from all directions. The only safe option is to carry on regardless, as the seething mass of two-wheeled machines – some carrying entire families – somehow manages to part like the Red Sea, allowing you to safely cross. Falter and it could be a different result entirely...

The other thing that you immediately notice about Vietnam's roads is the noise. Quite apart from the moped maelstrom, there is a constant cacophony of taxi, truck, car and bus horns as though using them is mandatory while driving.

Yet despite all of that, there is an overwhelming sense of serenity about Vietnam, underlined by its gracious and friendly people. Thailand portrays itself as the land of smiles but the Vietnamese are every bit as engaging, if not more so. Even in tourist honeypots, such as the ancient trading port of Hoi An close to Danang in Central Vietnam, the shopkeepers, street >

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'With three top-drawer courses, the Central Vietnam coast area claims the mantle of the country's premier golf destinations'



Laguna Lang (above and top); Montgomerie Links (above middle and right). Opposite: fishing boats of Hoi An

traders, guides and touts selling boat, bicycle, trishaw or moped tours seem to be less forceful in trying to get visitors to part with their cash than their Thai counterparts.

With its wealth of history, fascinating culture and landscapes encompassing everything from jungle-clad mountains and the stunning limestone peak islands of UNESCO-listed Halong Bay to some of Asia's best beaches, Vietnam successfully combines the best experiences you will find in Thailand with some of the best on offer in neighbouring China.

Danang's Red Beach, close to the 16th parallel that divided South Vietnam from the Communist North, was where American marines first landed in the Vietnam War (the Vietnamese call it the American War!) on March 8, 1965. Concrete bunkers built to protect warplanes and helicopters at the nearby US air base and still standing today are a reminder of the country's darkest days. But it is bunkers of a completely different sort that are now helping to bring in international visitors, with golf one of the new tourism magnets.

Vietnam's growing golfing reputation was recognised as long ago as 2008, when it was named Undiscovered Golf Destination

of the Year in the prestigious annual IAGTO Awards, the golf tourism industry's own Oscars, staged by global trade organisation IAGTO. It cemented that by being awarded Asia and Australasia Golf Destination of the Year in the 2013 awards.

The recent opening of the Nick Faldo-designed Laguna Lang Co Golf Club course, an hour north of Danang, now gives Vietnam 32 golf courses, and the country's master plan envisages 90 by 2020. Mainly clustered around the gateway cities of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (still sometimes called Saigon) and Danang, with others near Dalat and Nha Trang, they include a number by some of the game's top designers.

With three top-drawer courses, the Central Vietnam coast area centred on Danang claims the mantle of the country's premier golf destinations, its three clubs having joined together with leading hotels and resorts to form a collective called Golf Coast Vietnam.

Besides Laguna Lang Co, the area boasts the Danang Golf Club course, designed by Greg Norman, and Montgomerie Links Vietnam, by Colin Montgomerie, both of which are cheek by jowl just 15 kilometres south of Danang Airport and ➤

PICTURE CREDITS: MONTGOMERIE LINKS VIETNAM, LAGUNA LANG CO, PETER ELLEGARD





*‘More elevations,
plenty of water hazards
and large, well-
protected greens’*


The 12th at
Montgomerie Links in
Central Vietnam

15 kilometres from charming Hoi An. They opened in 2010 and 2009 respectively.

The latest addition, **Laguna Lang Co** which “Sir Nick” opened in March, forms part of the Laguna Lang Co integrated resort. Fronted by a three kilometre beach lapped by the East Sea, and with jungle-covered mountains rising behind, the 940-acre complex also features a Banyan Tree resort with 49 villas and a 229-room Angsana hotel, both with their own spas.

The 6958-yard, par 71 course is, according to Faldo, unique in Vietnam because it incorporates six environments: sand blow-outs, rice paddy fields, exposed rock outcrops, a beach, a river and a jungle. The rocks feature most prominently on the par 3 11th hole, singled out by the six-time Major champion as his particular favourite.

Severe undulations are a characteristic of all the greens, with golfers lucky to three-putt from some locations they will find themselves in. Another feature of the course are the “chocolate drops” on the par 3 fifth hole – a series of mounds that mirror the mountain peak behind the green and cup it like a punchbowl.

As with other courses in Vietnam, caddies are all female and wear traditional conical hats with their uniforms. Laguna Lang Co currently has 60 full-time caddies and another 30 part-time, drawn from nearby communities such as the pretty fishing village of Lang Co which can be visited after finishing golf. Another nearby attraction is former imperial capital Hue, which in its time played home to 13 Vietnamese emperors.

Longest of the Vietnam Golf Coats courses, at 7190 yards, the par 72 **Danang Golf Club** is laid out on sand dunes and has a links feel, with gentle contours, large waste sand and scrub areas and contoured bunkers. The course is split by the main coast road, with a tunnel linking the clubhouse and main part of the course with the three-hole loop by the ocean.

The signature hole is the par 3 16th hole, played directly out towards the sea and the distant Cham Islands. Fishing boats chug along the coast as golfers putt out on the green.

Montgomerie Links Vietnam also has links characteristics, but features more elevations, along with plenty of water hazards, indigenous vegetation and large, well-protected greens. The area’s original course, the 7063-yard, par 72 course may only be four years old but it gives the impression of being mature and long-established.

Away from the courses, the delights of Hoi An are well worth exploring. Along with historic Hue and the ancient ruins of My Son, Vietnam’s most significant archaeological site, Hoi An is one of three UNESCO-listed World Heritage Sites in the region.

To experience Hoi An at its best, choose your times wisely. Avoid the crowds by visiting the Old Quarter in the morning, when you can browse its many art galleries, curio shops and clothing stores at leisure. Take your time exploring attractions such as the ornate Japanese Covered Bridge or simply sit at a bar overlooking the Thu Bon River and people watch. Stay late to catch the sunset colours and bright lights of the main bridge, the waterside bars and the cafes reflected in the river,

PICTURE CREDITS: MONTGOMERIE LINKS VIETNAM

THE TRAVEL DETAILS

WHERE TO STAY

BANYAN TREE LANG CO

Part of Laguna Lang Co beach resort complex with all-pool villas and golf course. Rooms from \$800
Cu Du Village, Loc Vinh Commune, Phu Loc District, Thua Thien Hue Province
banyantree.com/en/lang_co,
lagunalangco.com

ANGSANA LANG CO

Also part of Laguna Lang Co, this new hotel exudes Asian chic. Rooms from \$443
Cu Du Village, Loc Vinh Commune, Phu Loc District, Thua Thien Hue Province
angsana.com/en/lang_co

THE OCEAN VILLAS

Part of Danang Beach Resort next to Danang Golf Club with spacious villas. Rooms from \$215
Son Tra-Dien Ngoc Coastal Street, Ngu Hanh Son, Danang
theoceanvillas.com.vn

HYATT REGENCY DANANG RESORT AND SPA

Luxury hotel on white-sand beach opposite Marble Mountain. Rooms from \$150
Truong Sa Street, Hoa Hai Ward, Ngu Hanh

Son District, Danang
danang.regency.hyatt.com

FUSION MAIA RESORT

All-inclusive five-star spa resort on the beachfront, with spa treatments included in room rates. Rooms from \$200
Truong Sa Street, Ngu Hanh Son, Danang
fusionmaiadanang.com

FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

MANGO MANGO

Celebrity chef Duc Tran’s second Hoi An

restaurant offers a fusion fare opposite the Old Quarter’s Japanese Bridge.
45 Nguyen Phuc Chu, Hoi An
+84 510 3911 863

SAFFRON

Dine overlooking Laguna Lang Co and the East Sea from Banyan Tree’s clifftop eatery.
Cu Du Village, Loc Vinh Commune, Phu Loc District, Thua Thien Hue Province
banyantree.com/en/lang_co,
lagunalangco.com



eating out or even learning to cook your own Vietnamese meal in a cooking class. Rent a bicycle and pedal past paddy fields, stopping in at the Cam Ha pottery village on your way. Or put some wind through your hair and take a motorbike tour.

Another option is to visit Marble Mountain, one of a cluster of eponymous marble and limestone hills, walking the 156 stone steps to the pagoda- and temple-decorated summit or taking the cable car (the mountain is honeycombed with caves and grottoes). Then relax on exquisite beaches such as An Bang Beach or Cua Dai Beach, or take a boat trip to the Cham Islands and go snorkelling in the clear waters.

Elsewhere in Vietnam, Hanoi’s courses include Heron Lake, Phoenix and Tam Dao golf resorts, and Dai Lai Star Golf & Country Club, while Ho Chi Minh City’s offerings include Twin Doves, Song Be, Dong Nai and Long Thanh courses as well as the Vietnam Golf & Country Club. Among the courses in Phan Thiet is Faldo’s first Vietnam creation, Ocean Dunes Golf Club – although by his own admission, when he designed that in the mid-1990s “I was a 30,000-foot architect; these days I’m much more hands on”.

As for the country’s attraction as a golf destination, Faldo enthuses: “Vietnam is one of the emerging nations and everything is on the up. The doors have been opened and everyone is starting to see it. It’s a beautiful country with culture and five-star resorts. I think it’s on the verge of people discovering what Vietnam is all about.”

Just take care as you cross the road... ¶




The Danang Golf
Club driving range;
clubhouse and 11th hole

