



Street life

FROM KEY-CUTTING TO CHILDREN'S TOYS TO LIVE DUCKS, THERE'S NO END TO THE SIDEWALK SHOPPING THAT FLANKS HO CHI MINH CITY'S STREETS. TAKE A STROLL DOWN THE ALLEYWAYS TO FIND THE TRUE HEART OF THE CITY

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Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam is a bubbling cauldron of contrasts, where high-end boutiques rub shoulders with tiny hole-in-the-wall eateries, and five-star hotels rim the fringe of the backpacker district. The city is growing up, its coming of age heralded by the arrival of international chain stores and designer brands. But its beating heart remains on its vibrant streets.

The central semi-organised grid of wide, tree-lined streets fans out from Nguyen Hue, the boulevard meeting an abrupt end at the elaborate Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Building. Off every road lies a twisted network of lanes, alleys and side streets, as tangled as a bowl of *pho* noodles. This is where the city's residents sleep, laugh, shop and play. Life here can't be contained – it is shared on the streets, lining the alleys with colour, offering a visual feast for those who look.

From dawn until dark, the roads fill with a melee of millions of motorbikes, the rules unwritten and unclear. Traffic flows organically, maintaining a steady pace, collisions avoided by sheer intuition. Families of five race past on two wheels, young children sleeping pressed between parents, their lullaby the thrum of the engine. Here a driver cuts across a snarl of

traffic, stopping roadside for a fifty-cent haircut, there a lady buys *che*, a boiled coconut-milk dessert on-the-go. A young man selects a goldfish peering bemusedly out of a plastic bag from a sun-baked collection swinging on the back of a bicycle, while women with crinkled faces and straw hats tout waffles cooked on coals, carried in milkmaid's yokes across their shoulders.

The aroma of food and drink wafts persistently in the air, from green coconuts, sliced open while you wait, to *banh mi*, crusty baguettes packed with a street-mama's love, and *rong bien*, a sweet, soothing, seaweed thirst-quencher. Iced coffee, handed over in oversized plastic cups, is laced liberally with sickly-sweet condensed milk, while tropical fruit is sold by the basket-load, or blended into gelatinous thick-shakes. Piles of spent sugar cane mount near juice sellers, as a wonton soup vendor wheels a mobile cart to her chosen spot, carefully placing lightweight plastic chairs and tables designed for pre-schoolers alongside a blank wall.

Down a narrow alley off Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, hundreds of motorbikes are parked in neat rows. Their owners drift to street-food restaurant Nam Son Beefsteak, ordering the

Nam Son special, a flat strip of steak topped with an egg, a meatball, and a splash of pâté, a bargain at less than US\$3. Every alley houses a hidden treat, from field crab hotpot, the small crustaceans raised in the rice paddies, to *banh xeo*, crispy shrimp pancakes wrapped in lettuce leaves and dipped in a succulent fish sauce.

Snack food tumbles from the doorways of cramped alley stores, bags of boiled quail eggs clipped to lengths of rope for easy access. Outside the temples, sparrows flit and chirrup in cages, waiting to be bought and released by devout visitors. *Xe om* drivers lie on the back of their motorbike-taxis, dozing in the afternoon sun as they wait for a fare and in turn, the men who repair punctures on every second corner wait for the drivers, as rows of multi-coloured helmets line up on the pavement like headless soldiers.

Sit inside an air-conditioned café and order a freshly-squeezed juice served in a delicate glass while Vietnam swirls past in a frenetic stream of activity. But when you're ready, step outside and inhale life road-side. This is the real Ho Chi Minh City; a city that rarely rests, and never sleeps, a city that drapes its colourful character on its kerbs, sharing its soul with whoever may roam its lively streets. 🍷