

STREETS AHEAD

From key cutting to pet selling, there's seemingly no end to the services rendered on the flanks of Saigon's roads. Giselle Whiteaker embarks on a sidewalk shopping spree. Photos by Khoa Tran.



▲ House Hunting

The economical version of Lego, these appeared on the street corners pre-Christmas, suggesting they're the latest must-have children's toy. Each packet includes 22 pieces that can be snap-locked together in a variety of shapes to create houses, buildings and barns. The set includes blank brick pieces, grids, and the best of all, windows with opening doors. Clever marketing ensures that a pack only contains two roof pieces, meaning a minimum of two packs is necessary for a reasonable result.

Cost: VND15,000 for two sets.

Where: The corner of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai and Mac Dinh Chi.



▲ Just Desserts

Love it or hate it, there is no denying that *che* is the same consistency of snot, which may explain its popularity with children. Sold in small plastic bags, it comes in every imaginable flavour including sweet potato, beans, corn or banana. To make *che*, boil coconut milk adding sugar to taste and a little flour to thicken the mixture. Stir continually throughout the process, then leave to cool, adding your preferred fruit, beans or vegetables.

Cost: VND5,000 per bag.

Where: Everywhere. Nguyen Dinh Chieu between Hai Ba Trung and Truong Dinh.



▲ Live in Saigon

As any good chef will tell you, there's nothing like fresh ingredients, and you can't get much fresher than live. Ducks are bought live for two reasons in Vietnam; as egg producers or as fresh meat. Duck eggs are bigger than chicken eggs, with a darker yolk and stronger flavour. You have probably eaten them without realising it and it is cheaper to buy Donald still quacking.

Cost: From VND40,000 a kilo and up. An average duck weighs 2.5 to 3kgs, so the math says VND100,000 per duck.

Where: Nguyen Huu Tho in District 7 on the right, heading towards Lotte Mart.



▲ Spirited Birds

Sparrows are usually seen near temples and are used to open the heart and free the spirit. They are bought to be released, specifically relevant on the 1st and 15th day of each month and after the death of a loved one as a wish for the spirit to be released. One sparrow is acceptable, but the standard is 20 to 30. Sceptics suggest the sparrows are simply recaptured, but it is the symbolism that is important.

Cost: VND10,000 for one; VND6,000 to VND7,000 if you are buying many.

Where: Close to the goldfish near Lang Ong temple.