

Foodie Adventures in Vietnam

MELINDA MURPHY tries out new treats on a culinary-themed trip to Hanoi and Hoa Binh.



It was not your typical meal. I stared at the rather large snails and, I swear, they stared at me back. I could almost hear the faint strains of “Duelling Banjos” in the background. “You gonna eat me? Really?” The village elder smiled politely. I smiled back. Finally, I grabbed the shell, a toothpick-type instrument and popped the seal. Out came a long string of meat. I hesitated, then took the plunge, putting it in my mouth and – bam! – it was delicious! Cooked in a tangy lemongrass sauce, the snail had a great flavour, even if the gooey texture was a bit hard to take. I washed it down with yet another celebratory shot of rice wine. That was but a part of my amazing foodie adventure to Vietnam.

Hanoi home visit

The tour started the day before in Hanoi, with the Nguyen family from Hanoi Cuisine hosting us in their home, a house built by their ancestors, with three generations currently living under one roof. The French high ceilings were once damaged when Americans bombed Hanoi during the Vietnam War (or, as the Vietnamese call it, the American War).

I loved the *bun cha*, a dish of rice noodles, fresh herbs and homemade fish sauce, topped with deep-fried spring rolls. But the real star of the meal was the lotus flower fried rice, cooked by Nguyen Quy, along with her daughter and daughter-in-law who all live in the home. Served in a massive bowl made out of leaves, the rice included vegetables and lotus flower seeds, which have a texture a bit like

garbanzo beans, but a flavour far more delicate. It was downright gorgeous. After dinner, their niece played the *dan tranh*, a native Vietnamese musical instrument, a harp of sorts. (Log onto expatliving.sg to hear what it sounds like.) What an incredible glimpse into local Hanoi life.

City to country

The next morning, we set out early for our four-hour bus ride to Hoa Binh province, 130km from Hanoi. Besides me and my fellow travel writers, were two very special chefs: Tu Nguyen, a Vietnamese “Iron Chef” known for a his unique take on oysters, and Nam Nguyen, a graduate of the Know One, Teach One (KOTO) school. This programme takes at-risk kids from small villages and teaches them a skill – cooking – to help pull themselves out of poverty. Having the two chefs with us made the trip more of a give-and-take than your usual tourist visit to the Muong people, and it also aimed to inspire the local children.

Before we started up the steep, dirt road to the remote region, we grabbed lunch, made fresh in a roadside house. We sat on the floor, the food laid out in dishes atop banana leaves; there was a salad of bamboo shoots and carrots, fried tofu, a whole fish topped with tomatoes, a green veggie and fried pork accompanied chicken cooked inside a piece of bamboo. The flavours were familiar, but combined into something new and wonderful to me. The Muong use very long chopsticks because all the dishes are meant to be shared. Everybody just reaches across everybody else to grab a bite.

Warm welcome

When we finally arrived at Suoi Mu Lodge (suoimulodge.vn), villagers poured out into the streets to see us. The women were shown to our one-room lodge, our beds on the floor, draped in mosquito nets, while the men stayed with the host family in their home, a traditional Muong structure where the family lives above the livestock. The houses are built on stilts to help cool the buildings and combat mudslides during rainy season. Muong tradition dictates that men and women – even if married – sleep separately when visiting their homes. A very nice, clean western toilet and shower with an in-line heater were happy surprises. Turns out, these are a couple of the long list of government requirements to qualify as a homestay in Vietnam.

Off we set on a long, hot hike, gathering greens for dinner, the locals showing us what we could and couldn't eat, while walking next to vast rice fields and up a hill to a magnificent waterfall. Everywhere I looked, there was another photo op: sunlit rice paddies, workers in the fields, oxen lazily strolling the dirt road and more.

Back at the village, the local children treated us like celebrities. They loved looking at the pictures and even trying their hand at using our cameras. Their life of freedom is vastly different than that of my own kids. These little ones wander the streets, playing volleyball, picking (very sour!) starfruit and bathing in the local river with nary an adult in sight.

Cooking class

That evening, the homestay host and chef, Thuc Bui, gave me a first-hand lesson on making a Muong speciality, *thit cuon la buoi*. The secret? Use young, tender pomelo leaves, put a small spoonful of spiced pork in the centre, then roll from the tip of the leaf to the stem. Each roll was inserted into a piece of bamboo cut into something resembling long tweezers and roasted over the open-flame hearth, on the second floor of the house.

Besides the rolls and snails, dinner included a feast of things I'd never seen

before: fish stuffed with herbs, bamboo shoots with pork and more. It was all quite yummy.

Afterwards, the entire village turned out to watch amateur dancers from around the area, dressed in their native finest, and we all took turns trying the bamboo dance, which entailed jumping in and out of long pieces of bamboo being moved around on the ground by the locals. Such fun! Young and old alike enjoyed a local, weak alcoholic drink served in a big, earthenware jar filled with rice and liquor, sipped through shared, meter-long straws.

Leaving it to the pros

The next morning, it was the chefs' turn to put on a show for the locals, presenting big platters of small toasts, topped with typical western fare: pate, an egg and mayo mixture and chopped tomatoes. I loved watching each face as it tried something new. Some wrinkled in disgust, but most liked what they tried. Even the village elders with their teeth blackened from years of chewing betel leaves, cautiously sampled the tidbits.

Soon after, our bags were packed and we were headed home.

This is the kind of trip that **Sens Asia Travel** does well, an experiential

trip designed to reawaken the senses, introducing travellers to new flavours, sights and sounds throughout Asia. The company is quite conscious of the experiences it develops, working hard to find the balance between modifying a village for tourist comforts and making sure it doesn't lose the very culture people come to experience. "You need to be a part of the community and be friends with them," said Sens Asia's Managing Director, Bui Ngoc Linh. "You must understand the local culture and client culture, and find a way to blend them together. We work hard to preserve the local way of life while also making their lives better."

The woman in charge of tourism for the area, Him Bui, explained that westerners first arrived in large numbers in 2007 to study animals and teach the locals tourism skills. The village now has a cement road and a good school, and some homes have electricity. Even with the improvements, they're managing to hang onto their local culture. But for how long? I noticed plenty of western clothing – and also that the children could do a mean dance to "Gangnam Style."

My advice? Go soon before the local traditions have faded, while you can still feel a bit like Marco Polo exploring a new world. *æ*



For more information about this itinerary and others, visit sensasia.com.