

Part 1:
Hanoi to
Da Nang

Xin chào!

Darren Calpin travels on Vietnam's Reunification Express – a 1,000 mile train route between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that serves as a symbol of the country's peaceful rebirth

FOR MUCH OF its recent history, Vietnam has been a divided nation: north and south bitterly opposed in their respective politics, philosophies and allegiances. It took several wounding wars, but the people of this indefatigable state have managed to create, in today's Vietnam, a modern, peaceful and entirely unified nation.

Like Vietnam itself, the so-called Reunification Express, a 1,000-plus mile single-track train route running between Hanoi in the north and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, has been bombed to hell and back. And, like Vietnamese society, it has been rebuilt and reopened for business. It is a metaphor of the country's turbulent recent past, and a symbol of its rebirth and reconciliation.

This, combined with the jaw-dropping scenery and the romance of long distance train travel, is what makes the Reunification Express arguably the best way to discover what

21st-century Vietnam is really like. Completed by the occupying French in 1936 to improve the infrastructure of what was then French Indo-China, this steel spinal cord linking the far north and south is certainly an impressive feat of engineering, despite catastrophic colonial mismanagement.

However, it only ran until 1954, ceasing service when the country officially split in two, and not resuming again until 1976, just 20 months after the 'American War' (as the Vietnam War is known in these parts) was over.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The north-to-south journey starts in the capital of Hanoi, a rapidly developing metropolis of gleaming skyscrapers and, at this time of year (early summer), brow-wiping humidity. This sprawling, vibrant city is home to more than 8,000,000 souls, most of whom

seem to spend their time welded to the deftly maneuvering scooters that zip around the gridlocked streets like impatient dragonflies.

Respite is on hand at the picturesque Temple of Literature, a revered academic retreat originally built as a university in 1070 and dedicated to the life and work of Confucius. The well-preserved courtyards, ponds and landscaped gardens within the hushed, well-preserved grounds are supremely calming; the perfect antidote to the capital's relentless energy.

The timeless Old Quarter, a collection of intimate, narrow alleys and ancient commercial lanes scattered around Hoan Kiem Lake, is the city's must-see district.

As such, the neighbourhood is often packed with fleets of cyclos, quaint three-wheeled bicycle taxis that ferry curious tourists in sedate style past the tiny Buddhist temples, regal pagodas, banyan trees and medieval

merchants' houses that line the evocative old streets. The affluent grandeur of the handsome French Quarter, with its wide boulevards, colonial villas and stunningly grandiose Opera House is, despite being very close by, a whole world away.

A NIGHT ON THE RAILS

Overnight trains for the 1,070 mile journey to Ho Chi Minh City, still known locally as Saigon, leave every evening from Hanoi station, a stark, rather imposing grey building

that's managed to retain some of its attractive 1900s features, despite being bombed by the US Air Force in 1972.

The train itself is a relatively modern diesel locomotive coupled to a long line of red, white and blue liveried carriages and a buffet car. Boarding is swift and straightforward, and Hanoi's sprawling suburbs soon drift away at a stately speed as the sun inches ever closer to the horizon. Daytime, as is the way around here, will soon retreat at speed.

Home for the night is a comfortable four-berth compartment (two upper beds, two lower) with air conditioning and a cute little table next to the window. A serious-looking guard-cum-porter-cum-hostess in a smart blue uniform tries to navigate a packed snack trolley along the carriage's side corridor, but is persistently thwarted by small children loitering in compartment doorways, too excited to go to bed. In contrast, most grown-ups find the rhythmic clackety-clacking and gentle swaying so relaxing that sleep comes easily.

There's nothing quite like waking up after a good night's sleep on a train. For that first few seconds the brain tricks the passenger into thinking they're at home in their own

Darren's en route to Ho Chi Minh City, still known locally as Saigon



Hanoi is home to more than 8,000,000 people, many of whom take to the streets on two wheels (or three)

GET METHERE

- GRJ Independent tailor make holidays to Vietnam for group tour organisers who are developing itineraries for small and/or large groups.
- The journey mentioned here is a sample trip of eight days, which included return air travel with Vietnam Airlines, hotel stays in Hanoi, Hue, Nah Trang and Saigon, excursions and selected meals. Flight upgrades available to premium economy or business class on request, and price subject to date of travel.
- The team at GRJ can create itineraries to suit group interests, including a guest speaker for groups interested in the history of Vietnam's railways.
- Find out more at www.greatrail.com/grj-independent or call 01904 527181.

bed. Soon enough though, the bemused traveller gets their bearings and immediately reaches for the tiny window curtains in the same way a young child might open an advent calendar door. Outside, rice paddies tended by farm workers sheltering under conical non la bamboo hats spool past, slow enough to make out faces, yet fast enough to be a mere memory in seconds.

This is rural Vietnam; lush, hot and oh so green. It makes a pleasant backdrop to a modest breakfast of warm sticky rice or »



Hanoi's Old Quarter



The team at GRJ can create itineraries to suit groups, including those interested in the history of Vietnam's railways

NEXT MONTH:
In the second leg of Darren's Vietnamese rail adventure, he leaves Da Nang's high-rise hotels behind, heading to the Marble Mountains as he journeys further south towards his final destination, Ho Chi Minh City.

dried noodles, which can be hydrated via the free boiling water dispensers at the end of every carriage.

It's a leisurely start to the day, with yawning travellers leaning against the corridor windows, making small talk with fellow passengers and taking snaps of incredulous water buffalo on smartphones. Within an hour though, the tentacle-like outskirts of Vietnam's former capital chase these rustic vistas away.

THE IMPERIAL CITY

Though it's quite possible to journey from Hanoi to Saigon in one straight 33-hour run, most first-time visitors to Vietnam opt to stop off at few places along the way. The ancient city of Huế, Vietnam's capital up until 1945, makes a fine pit-stop in this respect. Trips in dragon-style tour boats along the famed Perfume River, typically up to the scenic Thien Mu pagoda, are particularly popular. The river is so-called because, every autumn, flowers from orchards further along the river fall into the water, giving it a pleasant, perfume-like aroma.

Huế's biggest draw though is undoubtedly the Imperial City, a huge walled palace and UNESCO World Heritage Site that was the seat of power of Vietnam's ruling Nguyen Dynasty right up until the end of the Second World War.

Highlights include an unbelievably large flag tower and the sublime Forbidden Purple City,

an ornate inner sanctum used as a residence by the royal family. Unfortunately, both the Imperial City and surrounding citadel suffered substantial damage during the Tet Offensive stage of the Vietnam War.

Restoration is diligent, sympathetic and slow; bullet holes can still be seen in many of the two-metre thick stone walls. Despite this, the friendly guides who lead visitors around the complex, some of whom remember that period and are willing to talk candidly about the war, speak of forgiveness and looking to the future. This lack of bitterness; this absence of aggression is, in a quite profound way, even more moving than the bombed out monuments and shattered ruins that continue to scar one of the country's most revered sites.

STRIKING SCENERY

Easily ensconced in a roomy and thankfully very airy seating car, the 08.37 southbound Reunification Express rambles languidly out of Huế station. Though there are plenty of Westerners onboard, the majority of passengers are Vietnamese, many of them families. The parents chat casually in hushed tones, while the kids are smiley yet somewhat reserved. Things are a little different in the convivial buffet car where off-duty train staff sit at tables playing cards with gregarious kitchen hands, and tourists with gangly, unfurled maps

compare itineraries and swap Facebook details over a couple of Saigon Green beers.

This part of the journey is known for its striking scenery. Even the notoriously grumpy travel writer Paul Theroux once enthused: "Of all the places the railway had taken me since London, this was the loveliest."

Sure enough, it isn't long before sweeping vistas of the glinting South China Sea drift in from the east. One after another, arcing bays and secluded coves parade themselves in part, then full view while the creeping loco screeches its way up and around the cliff-traversing track.

Not to be outdone, Vietnam's mountainous interior joins the spectacle, presenting its jungle covered slopes and intimidating peaks for inspection as the determined diesel engine starts the ascent to the route's highest point nearly 500m above sea level.

A series of tunnels enables the train to inch its way up and along the majestic Hai Van ('Sea Cloud') Pass with the dogged yet laboured efficiency of an aging heavyweight boxing champ who refuses to retire. Pass negotiated and the locomotive gets a second wind, rolling gingerly and quickly back down toward the bays and boats of the coast, before curving east into the ultra-modern city of Da Nang. **GTW**

Part 2:
Da Nang to Ho
Chi Minh City

Eastern adventure

Darren Calpin climbs aboard Vietnam's Reunification Express – a 1,000-mile train route between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City

LEAVING DA NANG'S contemporary landmarks and high-rise hotels behind without fuss, the train points south once again. In the distance are the Marble Mountains, five sacred limestone hills named after the five natural elements: fire, water, earth, wood and gold.

The vibe in the carriage is more subdued now. Passengers are still taking in the scenery, but the endless parade of waterlogged plains and rice paddies seems to be a signal that this is the part of the journey where a nap is in order.

Even the surreal Vietnamese pop videos on the ceiling-hung TV screens and the clinking of the oft returning refreshment trolley fail to keep the general air of lethargy at bay. The photographers, still grinning as they apply digital enhancements to their shot reels, seem to be the only ones full of beans.

It is dark when the engine crawls, gratefully it feels, into Nha Trang. Like Hué and Hanoi before it, the station here has a modest buzz of activity, but isn't in any way hectic or overwhelming. After a long day on the rails, that in itself feels like a warm welcome.

THE WOW FACTOR

The fleeting transfer from the station to one of the city's many upscale beachfront hotels suggests Nha Trang may, on initial impressions, be something of a party town. With its late-night bars, flashy nightclubs, and illuminated seafront, it feels like Vietnam's answer to Surfers Paradise, Atlantic City or even, at a stretch, Blackpool. Tonight though, even at midnight, things are pretty quiet on the seafront, with only the odd disco pub or rustic beach bar still open. Say what you like about luxury high-rise

beachfront hotels, they don't skimp on views. The one from the tenth floor of the swish Novotel Nha Trang the following morning is testament to this, for here, laid out like a poster from a travel agent's window is Nha Trang Bay, a four-mile crescent of pure white sand and high, lazy palms lapped by turquoise waters dotted with lush, tropical islands.

You can almost hear the collective "wow" uttered by the multitudes of (mostly Russian and Chinese) holidaymakers as they pull back their curtains at the start of each day.

A casual stroll along the long, neat and thankfully quite shady promenade reveals there's much more to Nha Trang than foot-roasting sands and rolling waves. Walk north and then east for a short while and it's giant white Buddhas rather than upscale hotels which dominate the skyline. The 14m high statue of the Enlightened One stands (or sits, to be precise) on a hilltop behind the Long Son Pagoda, drawing in reverential glances from all around the city.

The temple is far more peaceful and empty than one would assume, affording

plenty of opportunities to meditate, take photos or simply retreat from the relentless sun. The viewing platform around the Buddha offers some terrific views of the city and countryside too.

THE STREETS OF NHA TRANG

Strolling around Nha Trang's lively backstreets and bustling main arteries is, thanks to the clearly visible signposts, a very manageable treat. Working life plays out very much at street level here, with workers and artisans carrying out their duties on the pavement all throughout the day. Everyone, from the scooter mechanics and food vendors to the furniture makers and clothes sellers seems to have stools and seats set up on 'their' patch of sidewalk where they can work in the fresh air and, if they're really lucky, catch a light breeze. Nearby is Dam market, a large and perennially popular three-storey indoor marketplace. Surrounding the main building's tatty perimeter is a ramshackle collection of shaded food stalls sporting large, exotic-looking goods tended by tired-looking women under conical hats. Inside,

things are neat, tidy and ordered, with souvenir outlets of every kind and food stalls adorned with beautifully presented spices.

The relaxed vendors: nearly all ladies, many of them dozing; are very laid-back in their approach to haggling. Even when visitors walk away rather than meet the 100,000 Dong (less than £4) asked to seal a deal, they don't seem to get the hump.

TOWERING INTO VIEW

A stroll across the nearby Cai River, with its scenic mountain backdrop and islet-based shrines, brings the magnificent Po Nagar Cham Towers into view. Now used as a mainly Vietnamese/Chinese place of worship, this small, exquisitely preserved complex set on a granite knoll was built between the 7th and 12th centuries, the Hindu period when the Kingdom of Champa flourished.

Only four of the original eight Cham towers still stand – the 28m-high North Tower, with its terraced pyramid-style roof and intricate carvings being the most impressive. It is, however, the gentle and really rather »

PHOTOGRAPHY
Darren's bound for Ho Chi Minh City, known locally as Saigon



intimate acts of worship, typically carried out by small groups of fussing middle-aged ladies, that make the strongest impression. Sitting on the floor, tinkling their bells and chanting almost half-heartedly, they are delightfully oblivious to the hordes of smartphone wielding tourists buzzing around them. It's like watching someone breakout an impromptu picnic on Oxford Street during rush hour.

Boulder-strewn Hong Chong beach is a short distance away. Watching the sun set here as locals snorkel for super-fresh seafood and families paddle in the super-shallow surf, it's hard to believe this stretch of coast was effectively one big American military base for much of the 1960s and early 70s. It's also clear to see that Nha Tra, twinkling and pulsing a few miles away, is far more than a mere party town.

BOUND FOR HO CHI MINH CITY

The 08.39 southbound train for Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) leaves a few minutes behind schedule the next morning. Despite the rather low, moody-looking grey clouds hovering over the now fleeting green landscape, the mood in the seating car is genial, sociable even. The carriage is full and the refreshment trolley, when it eventually comes buffeting down the aisle, is in great demand. Crisps and beers are popular, as are meal tickets for the bargain hot

chicken and rice dishes, cooked in the kitchen car and brought down later.

The clouds turn darker, and before long the windows are being lashed with lateral rain and lightning silhouettes the undulating forested hills. A Vietnamese man travelling with his sleeping young son hints it's no big deal, then smiles conspiratorially at a cheeky Westerner taking a photo of his fellow tour group companions dozing with their mouths open. Another group of travelling companions, British by the sound of them, begin an impromptu game of something resembling seat-based charades with a smartphone. The Vietnamese passengers in surrounding seats look amused and bemused in equal measure.

By mid-afternoon, the inclement weather has passed and the train and its passengers, most well fed and suitably rested, are nearing the journey's end. Towering glass office buildings shadowed by a hundred-and-one cranes slide into view as the train slows to a canter, clacking past suburban, scooter-packed train crossings, most which seem to regard barriers as superfluous additions. Disembarking at Gar Sai Gon, one is immediately excited by the prospect of discovering an elegant city of gallic charm, where leafy boulevards and grandiose buildings provide a backdrop of mystery and intrigue. Understandably, the artful prose of

Graham Greene's 1955 classic *The Quiet American* has a lot to answer for here.

COLONIAL CHARISMA

The short drive from the train station to the city centre reveals that, though much has changed since Greene was here in the early 1950s, Ho Chi Minh City has managed to retain a great deal of its colonial charisma and period character. Indeed, the regal old hotels, colonnaded streets, grand municipal buildings, lofty cathedrals and refined parks still characterise the old centre ville, despite the best efforts of the increasingly ubiquitous shopping malls and skyscrapers.

Even Greene's favourite haunt, the Continental Hotel, is still here, just a short stroll from Notre Dame Cathedral and overlooking the splendid Opera House. Sadly, there are now notably fewer tables and chairs outside where visiting writers can sit out and enjoy 'the cool wind from the Sài Gòn River' of an evening. That being said, a lavish meal on one of the grand pleasure vessels which cruise the river around sunset makes a very good substitute.

Within an easy ten-minute walk of the colonial city centre is a more recent site of historical significance, Independence Palace. This landmark building, once home to the President of South Vietnam, is famed for



Rush hour, Ho Chi Minh City style



Vietnam: where pink train stations are all the rage!

Nha Trang: Vietnam's answer to Atlantic City

Missed the first leg of Darren's journey?

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strong counter-narratives to those proffered by Hollywood over the past 30 years.

This 'alternative' look at a conflict which feels strangely familiar gets ramped up to a whole different level at the famed Cu Chi tunnels, 30 miles north of the city. This sprawling tunnel complex, replete with hospitals, kitchens, living quarters

and munitions stores was used to keep Viet Cong soldiers safe and hidden from the Americans during the Vietnam War. After watching a video detailing how 'the ruthless American bombs descended to mercilessly kill the gentle people of the peaceful countryside', visitors get to see how dastardly pit traps with revolving spikes and poisoned stakes were used to counter American military might by demoralising already disillusioned GIs. Visitors who are willing to get on their hands and knees can explore the laboriously dug tunnels for themselves; those with modest claustrophobia tend to discover their limitations pretty quickly.

A BITTER CONFLICT

A block away from the palace is the War Remnants Museum. This internationally acclaimed and very moving museum uses a large collection of artefacts, including jets and helicopters, along with a vast array of audio/visual exhibits to tell the story of both the First Indo-China War and the Vietnam War.

It is, in every sense, a real eye-opener, with the exhibitions devoted to the use of Agent Orange and Napalm delivering particularly

being the place where, courtesy of a tank smashing through the front gates, the Vietnam War came to an end in 1975. Two of the tanks used in the capture of the palace can still be seen parked in the grounds.

As in Hué, there are people working here who are willing to speak frankly

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about the Vietnam War. And, once again, the recollections are punctuated with messages of forgiveness and hopes for a peaceful future. It seems that, much like the Reunification Express, rebirth and reconciliation are now part of the national psyche of modern Vietnam. **GRJ**